

History of the St. Andrew's Society of Detroit: 1849 to 2000

By Fred Dunbar Wessells

[This history was heavily edited by James Schutze in May 2011 to include on the "Footprints" Family Genealogy web site. Mentions of William and Greta McCrie are highlighted in yellow. Elizabeth Schutze and Janet McCrie participated and won medals in the annual Highland dances and Jimmy McCrie was a highland piper. Some of my fondest childhood memories include the Bob-Lo boat rides (the live band and dance floor, and the hot, loud throbbing of the engine room) and days spent at Bob-Lo attending the Highland Games (and finding pennies in the sawdust game and riding the amusement rides). James Schutze.]

The Founding

"For the relief of the indigent and unfortunate of our Countrymen, and for the promotion of harmony and good feeling amongst ourselves, we the undersigned Scotchmen and Descendants of Scotchmen, with Benevolence for our motto, do unite ourselves into a Society and agree to abide by the following Constitution of the St. Andrew's Society of Detroit."

With this preamble, the St. Andrew's Society of Detroit was formed by 35 men on November 30, 1849.

Similar societies already had been founded in Philadelphia, Boston and New York, led by the great number of Scots who emigrated to the mid-Atlantic states. But in the 1800s, faced with oppression, religious intolerance and prospects of a better economy in the U.S., Scots continued to emigrate but now were moving into the midwest. Detroit, founded in 1701, was an established city with growing industrial roots, even before the automotive industry took it over in the early 1900s. The appeal of reasonably civilized prosperity began a large and strong Scottish community that continues to grow and flourish to this day.

In the early days, meetings were held three or four times a year, usually in the homes or businesses of members. During the 1850s, new members first began giving places of origin other than Scotland, including Montreal, Port Sarnia and Detroit, although the majority of the 409 members initiated through 1893 were from Scotland. From 1864 to 1894, the membership register included occupations, and the Society was rich with stonecutters, boilermakers, bookkeepers, carpenters, machinists, tinsmiths, clerks, grocers and blacksmiths. For the good of the Society, there were several physicians and liquor dealers and one undertaker.

The Early Years

By the end of 1860, 98 members had been initiated. The Scottish community in that day was a very strong and close-knit group, and as the concept of a Scottish Benevolent Society slowly unfolded, more men began to join.

The list of various occupations is a fascinating look at the time period: dyer, intelligence officer, machinist, boilermaker, grocer, saloonkeeper, painter, rope maker, pastor, blacksmith, laborer, land dealer, bookkeeper, ship carpenter, wood dealer, lawyer, carpenter and tailor. Besides the great number of self-owned companies, two of the largest employers at the time were the Michigan Central Railroad and the Detroit and Milwaukee Railroad. As the Society grew, its members began looking for more desirable quarters. It appears the first permanent location was the southwest corner of Woodward Avenue and State Street. Formerly the Central M.E. Church, in 1866 it was rebuilt for commercial purposes. The Society took over the third floor, which became St. Andrew's Hall from 1867 until 1883 when the building was demolished. That site later housed the B. Siegel Company.

Members came from every part of Scotland and represented virtually every trade. From the beginning, the Society was a very egalitarian organization, consisting of members who were tradesmen, businessmen and professionals in every field. The only common bonds were those that still exist today: Scottish birth or heritage, a belief in God and the desire to serve as a member of a benevolent society.

Late 19th Century

Late in 1883, the Society moved to the Masonic Hall, located on Jefferson Avenue immediately east of Shelby. In the early 1890s, the Society moved to the Merrill Block, which extended from Jefferson to Larned on the east side of Woodward Avenue, the present site of the City-County Building. In 1895 or 1896, the Society moved to

12 Woodward Avenue, an eight-story building, now demolished, that was the home of the Detroit United Railway.

Around 1900, the Society met at what was 44 Grand River Avenue, the northwest corner of Grand River and Times Square, then known as Park Place. The Society next moved to what was then 95 Fort Street West, which was on the south side of Fort Street between Wayne and Cass. By this time, however, the Society was beginning to grow in numbers and permanent housing became an issue.

When you read the history of the members itself, you can almost feel the industrial revolution unfolding before you during this time period. The membership still had an abundance of tradesmen, but from the mid-1880s to 1900 you start to see more professionals, more members involved with the fledgling transportation industry, photographers, more proprietors and the like. The other thing that is most noted is how close the Scottish community was in those days. Of course, Detroit hadn't begun to expand too much past the downtown area, so many members lived together in various boarding houses scattered through the immediate area.

During the latter part of the 19th century the Detroit Street Railway became motorized, allowing individuals to live farther away from center city and take the trolley between work and home.

The Society Enters the 20th Century

The great industrial changes that occurred in this city were just about to manifest themselves, turning Detroit into the automotive capital of the world. Names still famous today dotted the Detroit landscape at the end of the 19th century and into the first decades of the 20th.

Ransom Eli Olds produced his first automobile in 1895 and was making cars long before Henry Ford organized his company. Henry Leland began making transmissions for Ransom Olds in 1899, and the 1901 curved dash runabout was hugely popular. The car was made famous when driven to the second annual New York Auto Show, after which it became the most famous automobile in America. With 3,300 orders in 1902, the Oldsmobile became the world's best-selling car and the first to go into mass production. Engines for the car continued to be developed by Leland as well as the Dodge brothers. Leland eventually created the Cadillac, and other names entered the scene, including David Buick and Louis Chevrolet.

Henry Ford built his first car in June 1896, and by 1899 had built two more cars. He and five other investors started the Detroit Automobile Company in 1899, but it closed on February 1, 1901. He then started the Henry Ford Company, on November 30, 1901, with five other investors, but was soon forced out of the company—which was reorganized by Henry Leland into the Cadillac Automobile Company. On October 15, 1902, Ford's 999 Racers set a new American speed record of just under 60 miles per hour. Earlier, on August 10, 1902, Alexander Malcomson entered into a partnership with Ford and formed the Ford and Malcomson Company Ltd. That led to additional investors and the incorporation of the Ford Motor Company on June 16, 1903.

In the Society, this was the beginning of an interesting phenomenon. Henry Ford had manipulated his way into the forefront of automotive history by now; his production line brought thousands of men and their families to this area, and a large number of those men joined the Society. To this day, 1903 still ranks as the year in which the greatest number of members was initiated into the Society. It appears the growing and influential Scottish community in the city and Detroit's own "industrial revolution" attracted fellow Scottish emigrants who, as we have seen, were quite knowledgeable in the trades.

By April 1906, 1,213 men had been initiated into the Society, almost double the number at the turn of the century, a mere six years earlier. Silas Palmer introduced a resolution calling for the appointment of a committee to search for a location appropriate for the Society. On August 3, 1907, the cornerstone was laid for the building known as St. Andrew's Hall, located at 431 East Congress Street. The first meeting was held in the new hall on January 18, 1908, at which time 1,411 men had been initiated into the Society. The cost of the land and construction of the building was under \$50,000, but the resulting new home was a thing of beauty. A large brownstone-type building, the main floor held a huge ballroom and stage and smaller meeting rooms. The basement also had a large room that could be used for informal entertaining, as well as several other rooms. On the second floor was the Burns Room, which was strictly for Society meetings and occasional meetings of groups to whom the hall was periodically rented.

Clearly, the membership of the Society wanted a sturdy building, in a good area of downtown, that would serve all their meeting purposes and last for many years. And it did just that. From 1908 until the building was sold in 1994, it was the home of the Society, rented out to various ethnic, labor and political organizations for their meetings and used for the Society's regular meetings as well as all its major social events. The Burns Dinners or St. Andrew's Day Dinners were held in the main ballroom, which could accommodate several hundred diners. However, demographic changes in the city brought about a situation in the late 1980s whereby the Society member rolls declined, possibly because members no longer felt safe coming downtown. The building was sold in 1994, just a few years before the General Motors Corporation relocated its corporate headquarters across the street.

The first Highland Games were held in 1850, marking the 150th Annual Highland Games in August 1999. The St. Andrew's Society of Detroit Annual Highland Games are the oldest, continually presented Highland Games in the western hemisphere. The earliest detailed Games records are for the Games held on August 17, 1905, held at Bois Blanc Park (Bob-Lo Island). The Detroit, Belle Isle and Windsor Ferry Company, which offered the steamers *Pleasure*, *Promise*, *Sappho*, *Garland* and *Fortune*, reported that 1,583 adult tickets and 242 children's tickets were sold for that day's event.

The Society also began to see a change in member backgrounds. A considerable number of Scots had emigrated to Canada and then chose to move to Detroit when the automotive industry began to boom.

Post-World War II

One organization that was extremely active and a large part of the Society was the Ladies Auxiliary. Founded in 1910 as both a social group and, literally, an auxiliary group to help the Society itself, its members met regularly. The Auxiliary held separate fundraising events, helped with the Games and other major Society events, gave out their own benevolences, helped with managing the Hall and hosted receptions after Society meetings.

The Auxiliary was a major force in the Society, and noted members included Mrs. John Henry, Mrs. Erskine, Mrs. Campbell, Mrs. William Henry and many others from the early years. Later on, the Auxiliary was carried for years by the hard work of **Greta McCrie** and Eunice Turnbull, the latter of whom was elected an honorary member of the Society for her dedication and hard work and who is still active in the Society today. With the admission of women into the Society itself beginning in 1985, the need and desire for a Ladies Auxiliary essentially disappeared.

On January 7, 1952, Walter S. Rose (member 2409) was initiated into the Society. Walter was a cutter/grinder by trade. Born on November 4, 1900, in Glasgow, he became the Pipe Major of the St. Andrew's Society Pipe Band. To this day, the band wears the Walter Rose Tartan in his honor.

The Modern Era

As the Society entered the 1980s, two things happened. First, members started to more enthusiastically pursue their own genealogical histories, a movement that has only grown stronger at the turn of the century. This provides future genealogical researchers with a wealth of information that was not previously publicized.

Second, after a change in the Society's Constitution & Bylaws, a major step was taken on June 3, 1985, when the Society initiated its first woman. After initiating 2,937 men into the organization, the admission of women finally was permitted. As we enter the 21st century, there are still St. Andrew's societies in the U.S. that do not admit women to membership.

Noted Society Events

Benevolence has been the watchword of the Society since its founding, and records show that relief was extended wherever and whenever need was indicated. The St. Andrew's Society of Detroit is the oldest benevolent society in the state of Michigan. It was natural for those of Scottish birth to find their way to St. Andrew's, where, being worthy, their need was the only measure of the aid granted. The zeal with which such matters were handled became well known in the community from the Civil War era to World War II to such an extent that all applicants to the public authorities, when found to be of Scottish birth or ancestry, were referred to the St. Andrew's Society.

From the founding of the Society in 1849, profits realized from the various events held over the years have been used to fund those benevolences. In the early years, the Society was one of the leading benevolent organizations in Detroit. Early records indicate funds were used to buy food, clothing, household goods and coal for hundreds of poor members, widows of members and other Scottish families in need. After the founding of the Ladies Auxiliary in 1910, both the Society and Auxiliary held fundraising events and used the money for separate benevolent efforts, which became especially critical during the Depression years.

The Society has always celebrated the anniversary of St. Andrew's birth on November 30, with an event held as close to the actual feast day as possible. At times it has been a church service, other times a modest observance at a Society meeting, often a banquet. One memorable banquet was held on November 30, 1853, in the dining room of the Merchants Exchange Hotel, located at the southeast corner of Griswold and Woodbridge streets, which was owned by John Moore, one of the Society's organizers, and where the original Constitution and Bylaws were written.

In the mid-1800s there was an increasingly strong movement toward prohibition in the U.S. caused primarily by large groups of Irish immigrants who learned whisky was cheaper than beer and spent most of their weekends in drunken revelry with prostitution, gambling and other such interests being rampant. Maine was the first state to declare Prohibition, and Detroit was in the process of passing similar legislation. Scots in Detroit took the impending Prohibition by planning a banquet that would long be remembered. Twelve toasts were given and the affair concluded at 3 a.m. with all participants joining in the singing of "Auld Lang Syne." *The Daily Advertiser* used four columns in reporting the event. As it turned out, Prohibition in Detroit was indeed passed, but not until May 15, 1855. And, as most Detroiters of today could imagine, the law was completely ineffective; Detroit bars were opened again at the end of June 1855.

From the early days, the Society has observed the birthday of Robert Burns by a concert or other event held as close to January 25 as possible. In the summer of every year, one day has been given to Scottish Games. For many of the early years of the Society, the Games were held on Bob-Lo Island (Bois Blanc Island). In prior times, the Games were held at Sugar Island, Grosse Ile, Hickory Island, Belle Isle, Slocum's Island (now known as Elizabeth Park) and at Recreation Park, a ball park at John R and Brady Street near Harper Hospital.

The Games of August 17, 1944, were billed as "The Greatest Caledonian Games in the World." Held on Bob-Lo Island Park, Games of this era focused on athletic and piping/dancing events. There were boys and girls races, from ages 6 to 15, and both the ladies race and the ladies novelty. Other athletic events included the 100-yard dash, running high jump, 56-pound weight, pole vault, 16-pound shotput, quoits and the caber toss. Highland events included the usual piping and dancing events of today, but there also were competitions for best-dressed girl and boy in Highland costume.

On August 19, 1954, again at Bob-Lo, a beauty contest was added. Selection of the Tartan Queen offered a prize of a fall wardrobe valued at \$150. The Games Committee added the Irish Jig to the dancing competition.

Bob-Lo Island remained home to the Games until the late 1970s. In the last two decades at that site, Games chairmen included **William McCrie (1960)**. In the late 1970s, the Games were moved to Historic Fort Wayne, located on the riverfront in southwest Detroit. Chairmen of the various Fort Wayne Games included **William McCrie (1981)**. We remained there until 1991. In 1992, the Games were moved to the Edsel & Eleanor Ford House in Grosse Pointe Shores. The Society remained at the Ford House until 1996, when adult attendance exceeded 12,000, which forced the Society to find a new venue. The Society then moved to Greenmead, a historical village located in Livonia, which is the current Games home.

The modern Highland Games now attract a much larger audience and typically include nearly 20 pipe bands, more than 200 individual pipers and drummers, some 200 competing Highland dancers, professional and amateur athletes competing in the Scottish heavy events, 40 Clans, 30 vendors, food and drink tents, entertainment and a wide variety of exhibits, such as weavers, sheepdog herding, Highland cattle, re-enactments and other related events. The welcoming ceremony at noon is a colorful spectacle of massed bands, color guards, honor guards and thousands of visitors.

Conclusion

It is believed the first St. Andrew's Society was organized on this continent, rather than in Scotland.

The St. Andrew's Society of Detroit is rich in history with many current members being second-, third and even fourth-generation members. The original records of the Society have been donated to the Burton Historical Library in the Detroit Public Library. Those records are available to the public. Copies of the genealogical history have been donated to the Odom Genealogical Library in Moultrie, Georgia, the Mormon Family Search Centers in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, and Salt Lake City, Utah, the Newberry Library in Chicago, the Allen County, Indiana, Library and Detroit's Burton Historical Library. They may be perused at any of those locations, of course, or purchased if you wish your own copy.

Three thousand, five hundred and twenty-five men and women initiated through May 1998, and perhaps another 200 since, have come together over the past 150 years with only one common bond—Scottish birth or ancestry. Taken in the context of the major world events that have occurred in this time span, as well as the technological advances and dramatic changes in our culture, one thing is very certain. The St. Andrew's Society of Detroit was founded with benevolence, patriotism and fraternity as its bywords, and with benevolence as its main purpose. Whether in 1850 or in 2001, the Society has always been there for Scots in need and for local charitable organizations.

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[Original article is available at <http://detroitscots.com/documents/history.pdf>.]

[The following tale was extracted from the middle of the above history. It was moved here because it doesn't pertain to the history of the Society, but it does illuminate the character of some of its members.]

Judge David Cooper Vokes was born in 1905 in Detroit and was a judge in the Detroit Common Pleas Court. He was involved in running innumerable Highland Games and other events. He still attends an occasional event when health permits, but has brought us many, many fond memories of his years in service to the city and the Society.

Fortunately, he shared many of his memories with the Society during the 1990s. Reprinted below is part of a speech he gave to the St. Andrew's Masonic Lodge of Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, on January 26, 1972, which will convey an impression of David Vokes.

The Immortal Memory of Robert Burns

By Judge David Cooper Vokes

It is with great trepidation that I stand here tonight before this august body to speak to you about the immortal memory of Robert Burns. Yet, it is with a deep sense of gratitude that I accept this opportunity to break bread with you and to live again for a little while some of the great moments of the immortal bard.

Robert Burns was born 213 years ago about two miles south of Ayr in the neighborhood of Alloway Kirk and the Bridge of Doon in a clay cottage constructed by his father. A week after his birth, the cottage was demolished by a violent wind, and Burns and his mother were carried to the shelter of a neighbor's dwelling. The most remarkable feature of his life and death is that which came later, the endurance of his timeless verse. His songs and poems will live forever. Here is a man, a rustic poet, who lived only a little more than four months past his 37th birthday, but he crowded into that short span a lifetime of activity surpassed by no centurian.

I have been going to banquets for over half a century, and I will now burden your ears with a sampling of Sandy and MacTavish as portrayed by many speakers of various and sometimes doubtful ancestry and lineage. I am certain you all know the Scotch cure for seasickness is to hold a half-crown between your teeth. And I know you must have heard of Sandy who discharged his doctor for prescribing 25 cents worth of castor oil for the son who had swallowed a penny.

The opening line of a suitor's conversation with a prospective father-in-law is, "Mr. MacGregor, I think I have a proposition for you that can save you some money." Then there was the salesman for

the Edinburgh concern who died right here in Hamilton, and the manager of the hotel cabled his firm for instructions. By return wire he received this message, "Search his pockets for orders and mail back his samples."

MacIntosh took such long strides to save his \$10 shoes that he split his \$20 trousers. And the clicking noise in Stewart's pocket turned out to be his old lady's false teeth; she'd been raiding the refrigerator in his absence. The charity solicitor "Give until it hurts?" MacDuff said, "The very idea hurts." When MacDonald's son and heir ate a box of mothballs, the old man made him sleep in the clothes closet for a year.

A Scotsman had quite an altercation at the gate of heaven but finally proved to the satisfaction of St. Peter and his clerk that he had in his lifetime twice exercised himself in that noble virtue of charity, once in the sum of 10 cents and the other occasion he squandered 15 cents to alleviate the suffering of a hungry mother and her brood. Upon a direct question by St. Peter to his clerk as to the solution of whether this would allow the gentleman access to the heavenly kingdom, the clerk replied, "Give him back his 25 cents and tell him to go to the other place."

But let us return to the mainline. William Burns, father of the poet, was a farmer, and far from a prosperous one. He married Agnes Brown in December 1757, and Robert was their first born. Burns' father, though not overly successful, was a good man and a proud one, and concerned with his family. When Robert Burns was six, he was sent to a school at Alloway Hill. The teacher left, however, and William Burns and some neighbors engaged Mr. John Murdoch to teach their children, with the parents taking turns boarding the tutor. He taught reading, writing, spelling and English grammar. Robert also came in contact with a certain old woman by the name of Betty Davidson, who had the largest collection in the country of tales and songs concerning devils, ghosts, fairies and other folklore. Robert gleaned from her much material that was used in *Tam O'Shanter* and *Addresses to the Deil*.

When Mr. Murdoch left, the education of the Burns family fell to the father, and he drilled them in arithmetic. He secured books from a book society, and occasionally Mr. Murdoch would stop in, spend the night and leave a book to be read. By his 16th year, Robert had read a goodly number of pieces of standard literature and was far from the country bumpkin or unlettered oaf that some have pictured him. At 17 he went to dancing school at Tarbolton and was never again quite the same. One biographer wrote, "Here he first felt the sweets of society and could assure himself of his innate sense of superiority. His days were spent in work, but the evenings were his own, and these he seems to have spent almost entirely in sweethearting on his own account or on that of others. His brother tells us that he was almost constantly in love.

He decided to become a flax dresser, but fire destroyed the establishment and ended that venture. He returned to farming. His friend John Rankin introduced him to St. Mary's Lodge in Tarbolton, and Robert became an enthusiastic Freemason.

In 1774, at age 15, he met Nelly Kilpatrick, daughter of the blacksmith, and to her afterward he wrote his first song and first effort at rhyme, "O, once I loved a bonnie lass." During this time he was reading books belonging to others and also building up a respectable little library. He was beginning to write, especially verses to the charming maidens he admired so much. The oldest of his printed pieces were *Winter, A Dirge, The Death of Poor Mailee, John Barleycorn* and three songs: "It Was Upon a Lammas Night," "Now Westlin Winds and Slaughtering Guns" and "Beyond Yon Hills Where Strinchar Flows."

In 1784 his father died, and he and his brother stocked a new farm. It was also when he met Jean Armour—"Bonnie Jean." By 1785 he was writing in earnest, and in 1786 reached Edinburgh and instantly became the lion of the season. His poems were published in August 1786 and were an instant success. By 1787 he had brought out a second edition.

I mention these early years to put the lie to those who have chronicled his life with a jaundiced and untruthful eye. Burns was a great man as well as a great poet. Principle Robertson of Edinburgh declared, "I think Burns was one of the most extraordinary men I ever met. His poetry surprised me

very much, his prose surprised me even more and his conversation surprised me more than his poetry and prose." Eminent philosopher Dugald Stewart said, "From his conversation I should have pronounced him fitted to excel in whatever walk of ambition he had chosen to exert his abilities." The Duchess of Gordon said, "No man's conversation ever carried me so completely off my feet."

Alexander Findlater, supervisor of the Dumfries Excise District, where Burns spent many years as an exemplary employee, testified to Burns' habitual sobriety. Rev. James Gray, rector of Dumfries Academy, wrote, "It came under my own view professionally that he superintended the education of his children with a degree of care I have never seen surpassed by any parent whatever." Professor Frankly Snyder of Northwestern University remarked, "One should remember the amount of literary works Burns accomplished at Dumfries, the excellent record he made in the excise and the success with which he cared for his family on an income that never exceeded 90 pounds a year. It is impossible to reconcile the alcoholic debauchee theory with these admitted facts."

In March 1787, Burns wrote to Mrs. Dunlop, "The appellation of a Scottish bard is by far my highest pride, to continue to deserve it my most exalted ambition." These statements are irrefutable proof he knew he was placing limits on the appreciation of his poetry and songs by using the Scottish Doric as the vehicle of his expression. He chose the Doric because he wished to be known as a Scottish Bard. Ralph Waldo Emerson stated, "Burns made the Lowland Scotch a Doric dialect of fame. It is the only example in history of a language made classic by the genius of a single man." While Professor Chandler of the University of Chicago stated, "It was worth all the time and trouble to master the entire Scottish dialect just to thoroughly appreciate one of Burns' poems."

The universality of the message of Robert Burns is one of the outstanding wonders in the history of the world. Burns was only out of Scotland once in his entire lifetime, and then only for a few days. When his Kilmarnock Edition was published in 1786, he had never been more than 25 miles from his birthplace. There were no paved or graveled roads in Ayrshire, no means of transportation except a heavy workhorse or two-wheeled cart.

Burns wrote of himself:

"I am nae poet, in a sense
But just a rhymer like by chance.
And hae to learning nae pretense,
Yet what the matter
Whene'er my muse does on me glance
I jingle at her."