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THE BLIND VEXILLOLOGIST

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It would seem to be an oxymoron to speak of a blind photographer or a blind graphic designer or a blind vexillologist. Precious as sight is to every human, those who deal with the realm of color, form, and composition as part of their profession or as an avocation may be said to have an even greater reliance on vision.

The brilliance and the subtlety of flag design, the endless variations of themes, the shock of unexpected combinations, the force of a simple but striking pattern—all of these speak directly of the beauty and majesty and power which we associate with flags. To one who has never had sight, a verbal explanation of even the simplest flag design must be like hearing a foreign language. On the contrary, the power of flag designs and colors expresses itself strongly and immediately to sighted people from all cultures, at any age, and of different sensitivities and interests.

Simply put, images of flags and actual flags flying in the breeze—even before their fascinating stories were known—are precisely what attracted many individuals, perhaps most, to flags long before they yearned to become vexillologists. Thus it would seem that the only blind vexillologist possible would be someone who became interested in flags and only later lost the faculty of vision, such that new flags could still be “seen” in the imagination if described.

Blindness is not solely an affliction of the eye, however. Literature has long recognized the truth of such human frailties as are reflected in the saying “none are so blind as they who will not see.” Moreover, in vexillology as in religion, believing is seeing. How many have, like this writer, looked at the photograph of the “Jewish national flag” appearing on p. 373 of the September 1934 *National Geographic Magazine* [see p. 4] and have seen only a blue over white bicolor with a Shield of David in counterchanged colors? We do not see the black **H** within the emblem—not because it is invisible, but because we do not expect it to be there. Conversely, we “see” the Stars and Stripes even if the number of each is fewer than it should be, because we understand the intention of the artist who omits some stripes and some stars for simplicity’s sake.

There is another kind of blindness, however, of greater import. Just as the true character of men and women lies in such things as their belief systems and the way they treat other humans, rather than in their physical appearance or the way they dress, so any flag is best understood and judged not by heraldic or other esthetic standards, but by the roles which it plays in molding human lives for better or ill.

To comprehend a flag ultimately requires only modest attention to its shape, colors, emblems, and composition. Which social forces created

continued on page 4

CONTENTS

1919 Civic Parade2



WWI CIVIC PARADE: U.S. Army soliders march during the 1919 Victory Spring Carnival Parade.

San Antonio Express-News file photo.

THE 1919 VICTORY SPRING CARNIVAL PARADE IN SAN ANTONIO

Each spring, the people of San Antonio hold a 10-day Fiesta, which includes parades, parties, art shows, sporting events, historical tours, and many others. Fiesta started in 1891, when Ellen Maury Slayden, wife of Congressman James L. Slayden, organized a flower parade to honor salute the heroes of the Texas Revolution who fought at the battles of the Alamo and San Jacinto. The 1919 event was renamed the Victory Spring Carnival to mark the Allies' recent victory in World War I. The account of that year's parade provides insight into the , political, historical, and psychological life of several flags.

SIX FLAGS OF TEXAS LEAD CIVIC PARADE

Historical Pageant Ushers in Line of Marchers, Including Suffrage Workers

San Antonio Evening News p. 12 (April 23, 1919).

A civic parade at 4 o'clock this afternoon and a suffrage rally tonight are the features of civic day today in the Victory Spring Carnival.

The civic parade begins at 4 o'clock in front of the Postoffice, the parade having been made up at 3:30 o'clock in Avenues D and E. From the Post office the line of march goes down Commerce Street to San Saba, across San Saba to Houston, east on Houston to the Postoffice again.

The first announcement of civic parade this afternoon is the appearance of a solitary Indian carrying a totem pole—the first flag of Texas. Following the Indian totem pole are the six flags which have waved over San Antonio withing the last three centuries.

After the Indian, who represents the period about 1718, comes the flag of Spain which flew over 1718 to 1721. This flag in turn is followed by the flag of Mexico, borne by a representative of that country. A Texas cowboy carries the flag of the Texas Republic, which waved from the time Texas gained its independence from Mexico in 1836 to its annexation to the United States of America in 1845. Maj. C.M. Barnes, re-

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tired, bears the flag of the United States, under which Texas lived until the Civil War in 1861. The flag of the Confederacy, 1861–1865, is borne by Modesto Torres, a veteran of the Confederate army. Finally the flag of the city of San Antonio, carried by a policeman designated by Chief Lancaster, concludes the flag history of San Antonio. This city flag was presented to San Antonio two years ago by the Rotary Club.

Heading the body of the parade this afternoon is Maj. Alexander Boynton, grand marshal. Immediately following Maj. Boynton are Mayor Bell, Maj. Gen. DeRosey C. Cabell, commander of the Southern Department, Postmaster George D. Armistead, Judge Duval West of the United States District Court in one automobile, and the City Commissions in a second car.

Just behind the City Commissioners are the City Police and Fire Departments, followed by the City Street Cleaning and Park Department. Next come the county officials and the officers of the Robert B. Green Memorial Hospital.

The next division of the parade is the decorated floats representing various civic organizations as follows:

Fort Sam Houston Base Hospital, Confederate Veterans, Grand Army of the Republic, Woman's Relief Corps, Peacock Military Academy, Chamber of Commerce, Retail Merchants' Association, Lions' Club, Kiwanis Blus, San Antonio Builders' Exchange, San Antonio Trades Council, San Antonio Public Service Company, Shriners, Woodmen of the World, Modern Woodmen of America, Manufacturers' Club, Zionist Society, Hadassah Society, the Italian Club, the Young Women's Christian Association.

The equal franchise section of the parade follows the floats.

After the decorated floats are about fifteen automobiles decorated with the gold and white of the equal suffrage colors. The suffrage workers also carry out the color scheme of the association in their costumes. Slogans of the campaign advertise the efforts of the women of Texas to gain equal suffrage by announcing that "Woman's House Has Struck." and asking that for "Democracy for Texas," and to "Give the Vote to Mother." Little girls in white frocks and gold sashes are to distribute suffrage literature and a copy of the proposed equal suffrage amendment about the streets while the parade passes. The arrangements for the suffrage section of the parade were made by Mrs. Hart Thompson, Mrs. J.H. Smith and J.E. Melsman.

One of the features of the entire parade is the "water wagon" section being given by the local organization of the W.C.T.U. in representation of the Nation's acceptance of National prohibition.

Leading this section is Uncle Sam—impersonated by Sergeant John T. Scoggins of the Quartermaster Corps, mounted on a snow white water wagon and driving a pair of gleaming white horses. Snow white, the color of the National W.C.T.U. organization, is the only color used in decoration of the "water wagon" section of the parade. White bows and yards of white crepe paper have been used to give effectiveness to this section. Many local merchants have donated material for the W.C.T.U. decorations.

Just behind the water wagon is a huge white float crowded with little children, representing various Sunday Schools of the State. A dozen or more automobiles, also decorated in white, give a representation of the W.C.T.U. workers and the ministers of the city. W.C.T.U. banners and slogans are carried by Boy Scouts of the city. The plans for this section of the parade were worked out by a committee composed of Mrs. H.A. Moos, local W.C.T.U. president, assisted by Mesdames Herbert Linscott, C.G. Griswold, H.B. Barricklow, Margaret K. Jones and Laura R. Robertson.

On Main Plaza J. Ira Kercheville will be the speaker at a meeting which opens at 8:30 o'clock with J.H. Haile as chairman. Mass signing of popular favorites will be a feature, preceding the talk of Mr. Kercheville, Herbert Wall leading.

In Washington Park, just south of Market Hall, there will be a meeting in which Spanish will be the medium of the speakers and this program will be in charge of Mrs. Henry Guerra.

Four additional sections follow the first, composed of city and county officials. These are:

Second section, head at Seventh and Avenue D, composed of Motor Transport, Base Hospital, Confederate Veterans, Grand Army, Women's Relief Corps, Peacock Academy, schools.

Third section, (civic organizations), Chamber of Commerce, Retail Merchants, San Antonio Builders' Exchange, Kiwanis Club, Lions' Club.

Fourth section, San Antonio Trades Council, San Antonio Public Service Company, San Antonio Public Service Company's shops, San Antonio Telephone Company.

Fifth section, (fraternal organizations), Shriners, Woodmen of the World, Zionist Society, Hadassah Society, Italian Society, Greek Society, Y.W.C.A., Equal Franchise, Women's Christian Temperance Union.

VERNACULAR FLAG:
Jewish people living in
Palestine during the
British mandate (1918–
1948) created this flag
to represent them.
Internet Archive



SMITH: “THE SOCIAL, POLITICAL, HISTORICAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL LIFE OF A FLAG” IS WHAT INTERESTS VEXILLOGISTS

continued from page 1

it and why; what it is said to stand for and what its usage tells us about its real symbolism; what ceremonies and traditions surround it; what coercive measures exist to enforce respect for it; how many have been inspired by it and how many have died for it—these and similar issues define the essence of any flag for the real vexillologist.

To ignore the social, political, historical, and psychological life of a flag while focusing on its esthetic components is to be a blind vexillologist. To acknowledge that fact is in no way to deny the legitimate appeal of the endless colorful flags and images of flags in our streets and public buildings, on television, in books and charts, on the Internet, and in myriad other everyday circumstances. Nevertheless a collection of brilliant mounted butterflies does not make one a lepidopterist nor does the amassing of important paintings guarantee that the owner is an art historian.

There are words and concepts which sometimes illuminate vexillology better than a whole page of flag images. The scholar, the philosopher, and the poet are among the many who can help us “see” flags more clearly: Emily Dickinson, for example, warns us that “flags are a brave sight, but no true eye ever went by one steadily.” May the true eye of each vexillologist rely on that inner vision which derives from knowledge and analysis and, while cherishing the brave sight of flags, may it never become blinded by them.

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