

A Brief History of the Caledonian Club of San Francisco's Scottish Highland Gathering and Games



In the Beginning

Long before colonists began to settle in the New World, Scotland already had a lengthy history and culture. Heavy Athletics Events were being held in Scotland at least 1,000 years ago, and some historians believe that Heavy Events originated during Druid times! Heavy Events began as tests of strength and conditioning for Scottish troops. A tree trunk would be made into a caber and tossed by the strongest military men. Smooth rocks from river beds would be heaved for distance. Lead weights would be tossed underhand over a bar more than twice as high as the athlete. Over the centuries, Heavy Events evolved from military exercises into festivals for the Scottish public, and with the addition of dancing, music, food and drink, the Highland Games were born. They are a traditional method of passing Scottish culture from generation to generation, and held throughout Scotland and the rest of the World.

Caledonian Club of San Francisco's Inaugural Games

In 1866, San Francisco had been sobered by the Civil War, the bloodiest war in American history. It was also still recovering from the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln and the gunning down in a city street of prominent newspaper editor, James King. California's gold rush had attracted many a Scot to San Francisco, and on November 24, 1866, seventeen Scots congregated in Clem Dixon's Ale Vaults on Summer Street to plan California's first Scottish Games. Less than a week later, the inaugural Games were held at San Francisco's Hayes Park (on Laguna and Hayes Streets) on Thanksgiving Day 1866.

The Club's inaugural Games were more of a family picnic and athletic contest featuring nine competitive events including hammer throwing and stone putting, and three-legged and blindfolded wheelbarrow races. This article (right) published in the following day's Daily Evening Bulletin covered the Games, and noted that the "solid silver quoit" awarded to quoits champion, Mr Carmichael, was valued at \$50, which was no mean prize in 1866!

Inauguration of Scottish Games at Hayes' Park.

The Caledonian Club of this city met yesterday (Thanksgiving day) to play some of the old Scottish games that for ages have been so popular amongst the kilted clans of the North. A lively competition for the various prizes of the day was manifested, and particularly so for the leading prize, a beautiful quoit of solid silver, valued at \$50. There were four competitors for the prize, viz., Messrs. Bell, Scobie, Carmichael and Scott. The first two retired from the contest, leaving Mr. Carmichael and G. Scott to play the game of 21 points, the distance being 18 yards. The match was so equal that the contending parties stood 20 to 20. Mr. Carmichael was lucky enough to get the winning point, consequently the silver prize.

Throwing the Heavy Hammer, weight 16 pounds.—A. F. McDonald throwing the implement 78 feet 6 inches, bore off the first prize. A. S. McDonald got the second prize—distance 67 feet.

Throwing the Light Hammer.—The two representatives of the clan McDonald divided the honors in this game, A. F. McDonald throwing the 12-pound implement a distance of 92 feet, leaving his competitor, A. S. McDonald exactly 10 feet behind.

Putting stone, weight 26 pounds.—George Scott threw the stone 22 feet 1 inch, and bore off the prize, Mr. Chisholm being only 2 inches behind him.

Hop, Skip and Jump.—George Scott's agility beat all other competitors, his distance being 35 feet 6 inches.

Running Leap.—Mr. Carmichael took the prize—distance 15 feet 7 inches.

Running High Leap.—Mr. Carmichael cleared a height of 4 feet and took the prize.

Blindfolded Wheelbarrow Race.—This ridiculous game caused much merriment and the prize was successfully won by James Scobie.

The Three Legged Race.—The most laughable exhibition of the day, the honors of which were divided among the two McDonalds.

The umpires of the day were R. B. Torrance and Hugh Davidson.

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A History of Tradition and Growth

The Caledonian Club of San Francisco's Scottish Highland Gathering and Games have taken place every year since that inaugural event in Hayes Park in 1866. The scale of the Games has grown significantly as events attracted more competitors, more events were added, and bigger crowds turned up. Over the years, the Scottish Highland Gathering and Games had been held at various locations in San Francisco, Sausalito and Oakland before settling on Santa Rosa in 1962, and switching to a 2-day format in 1964. The Games remained in Santa Rosa for the next 32 years, hosting the Centennial Games of 1965 and the first U.S. Invitational Heavy Events Championships in 1975. In 1994, the Games moved to the Alameda County Fairgrounds in Pleasanton.

The Largest Scottish Highland Gathering and Games

On Labor Day Weekend 2015, the Sesquicentennial Scottish Highland Gathering and Games attracted record crowds close to 50,000 – the largest Scottish gathering ever in the USA. The 153rd Games on September 1-2, 2018 at the Alameda County Fairgrounds marked the 25th anniversary of the Games moving to Pleasanton. This 2-day event features Heavy Events Championships, the US Drum Major Championships, the Western U.S. Open Highland Dancing Championships and various grades of Pipe Band Competitions. Other competitive events include the Kilted Mile Race and Soccer, Shinty and Rugby competitions. Visitors to the Games can enjoy Scottish Country Dancers, the San Francisco Scottish Fiddlers and other traditional entertainment on the Celtic Heritage stages. Other events include Birds of Prey and Archery exhibitions, historical re-enactments, historic British cars and motorcycles, sheep dog trials, the Clan Glen and Children's Glen, Clydesdale horses and Highland cattle. In addition, there is more live entertainment in the Irish Pavilion, Traditional and Celtic Rock Bands on the Entertainment Stages and whisky tasting and master classes with 'Whisky Live'. Finally, each day, the Games Grandstand Show features the ceremony, competition and entertainment of the Games including the hugely impressive March of the Massed Bands with over 600 pipers and drummers.

The annual Scottish Highland Gathering and Games are produced entirely by volunteers from the Caledonian Club of San Francisco, and does not take government funding or apply for foundation support.

