

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. Back then, California's gold rush had attracted many a Scot to San Francisco, and some seventeen Scots congregated in the recently established Ale Vaults on Summer Street to plan San Francisco's first Games. Less than a week later, the inaugural Games were held at San Francisco's Hayes Park on 12th and Market 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. It 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 the 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, Step 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 inch ea.

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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1866	Statistic	2015
First	Games Sequence	Sesquicentennial
Thanksgiving Day, 1866	Games Date	Labor Day Weekend, 2015
1 Day	Games Duration	2 Days
Hayes Park, San Francisco	Games Location	Alameda County Fairgrounds, Pleasanton
Invitational Picnic and Games	Games Format	Highland Gathering and Games
Athletics venue with 9 events	Games Events	21 venues with over 60 competitive events
Less than 500	Games Attendees	Almost 50,000

A History of Tradition and Growth

The Caledonian Club of San Francisco's Scottish Highland Gathering and Games have taken place every year since 1866. They have survived World Wars, earthquakes, economic depressions and Bay Bridge closures.

Since that inaugural event in San Francisco's Hayes Park, the scale of the Games has grown as more events were added and bigger crowds turned up. Over the years, the Games have been held at various locations in San Francisco, Sausalito and Oakland before settling on Santa Rosa in 1962. The Games remained there 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 again to the Alameda County Fairgrounds in Pleasanton where they've been held ever since.

Sesquicentennial Scottish Highland Gathering and Games

Today, the Caledonian Club of San Francisco's Scottish Highland Gathering and Games are the largest in the USA. This year's 153rd Games is a 2-day event that will take place on September 1-2 at the Alameda County Fairgrounds in Pleasanton. It 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 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.

