



Strachan (seated, second from left) and Strawhun (seated, second from right) at the Convention of Clan Strachan on April 11 in Scotland. COURTESY OF DENNIS STRAWHUN

Local men help unite Scottish clan

Friends who met through shared heritage convene gathering to pick leader

PAM KRAGEN • U-T

CARLSBAD

For 186 years, Scotland's ancient and once-proud Clan Strachan has been fading from history without a leader. But thanks to a pair of tireless genealogy buffs living 5,000 miles away in Carlsbad and Temecula, the Clan is now whole again.

On April 11 in Edinburgh, Scotland, James Strachan of Temecula and Dennis Strawhun of Carlsbad convened a gathering of Clan Strachan Society members from around the world to appoint a new commander in chief.

The convention was front-page news in Scotland, which hadn't seen a family convention in more than 20 years. And it was the culmination of nearly 10 years of hard work by the two friends, who each trace their roots to a tiny village in the Grampian Highlands of Northeast Scotland.

James Strachan said it's been a "long, wild and crazy journey" that has required multiple trips to Scotland, more than 3,000 emails, 300 letters and lots of money — but for him and Strawhun, it was their duty.

"Under Scots law, you're not an honorable family unless you have a recognized chief, so we made it our goal to get a chief and bring legitimacy and honor back to the name," he said.

The Clan Strachan traces its roots to the 1100s, when families began using surnames connected to where they were born (Strachan's name derives from the Gaelic words for "broad valley" and "river"). In 1195, Scotland's King William established the thanage of Strachan (similar to an earldom) and the families prospered. But when Robert the Bruce battled his way to the Scottish throne in the early 1300s, the Strachans lost their lands (no clan member has owned land in the district in the 700 years since).

Although Clan Strachan lost its



James Strachan of Temecula (left) and Dennis Strawhun of Carlsbad meet for a beer and a whiskey at O'Sullivan's pub in downtown Carlsbad. CHARLIE NEUMAN • U-T

thanage and castle, the clan had continuous leadership until 1828, when its last legitimate lord chieftain — Royal Navy Admiral Sir Richard John Strachan — died in London. The clan was dealt a further blow in the mid-1800s, when the government displaced thousands of tenant farmers from the Highlands in its "clearances" program. Strachans scattered across the globe to England, Canada, the United States, Australia and New Zealand, and along the way their surname changed to derivatives like Strahan, Strawhun, Strawn and Strong.

Strawhun, 56, has traced his roots to the Argyll colony, established by Scottish and other émigrés in North Carolina in the 1700s. His family ended up in San Diego when his father joined the Navy. Strachan, 49, said his grandfather immigrated to New York from Greenock, Scotland, and his work in aircraft design brought him to General Dynamics in San Diego decades ago.

Strachan said he was inspired

to look into his family's Scottish heritage when his grandfather died in 1996. After years of study on Clan Strachan, he shared his research on a website (clanstrachan.org) in 2003. Two years later, Strawhun discovered the website during his own family tree search. After a few emails, the two strangers agreed to meet at an Irish pub in Escondido, and when they came face to face they were shocked at their physical resemblance.

Both men are the same height, barrel-chested and with similar jaws and foreheads. Although they're not blood relations, they could be brothers, and their lives have followed similar paths. Both have long happy marriages with three children and both are new grandfathers. Their families have grown close and the pair have traveled together to Scotland three times.

"We have so much in common," said Strachan, who owns a network communications company in Temecula. "I think people who are interested in genealogy are

generally well-educated, have a strong sense of the value of family and they're just genuinely good people."

Yet while Strachan is more the buttoned-up, clean-cut type, Strawhun is the fun-loving pirate, with shoulder-length hair, earrings and a mischievous sense of humor. The longtime maintenance worker for the city of Carlsbad is a veteran organizer for Scottish games and the founder of Clan Inebriated, a tongue-in-cheek heritage group that welcomes Scots of all tartans.

In 2005, the fast friends co-founded the Clan Strachan Society with the goal of restoring a clan member as chieftain. But their effort — made by two overeager Americans untrained in the finer points of Scottish tradition — bombed.

In Scotland there's a saying called "gutting the fish," an ages-old bare-hands technique for catching fish that requires extreme patience. Scottish clan members warned Strachan and Strawhun that the same slow and

cautious approach was needed to win approval from Edinburgh's Court of the Lord Lyon. So, from 2010 to 2013, they recruited clan members from around the world to present the Lord Lyon with their armatures, or family trees traced to the Strachan region.

There were petitions to be filed, letters to be sent to Scottish landholders and an initial family convention in 2013, which was conducted via teleconference. On that day, Society members chose three candidates for chief — all Scotsmen who lived in and around Strachan. Then last month, clan members from Scotland, England, New Zealand, Canada and the U.S. gathered in Edinburgh for the election. The unanimous winner was Charles Robert Lund Strachan from the Mill of Strachan in Aberdeenshire.

Strawhun said "Robby" Strachan clinched the victory with his humble promise to do all he can to serve the society. The Lord Lyon is expected to approve his appointment as commander of Clan Strachan, and in a few years he should be elevated to the rank of hereditary chief.

With their main goal accomplished, Strachan and Strawhun said they're moving on to other tasks. They'd like to establish a family trust to buy land in Strachan, which will re-establish hereditary residency and provide a humble cottage or bed where clan members can stay during pilgrimages. They'd also like to build a clan war memorial and expand recruitment to the society. Strachan said there may be more than 10,000 Strachan descendants worldwide.

Strachan and Strawhun said their favorite memory from the convention last month was the reaction by their Scottish clan members.

"They pulled us aside and said they were embarrassed that it took a couple of Yanks to start this, but then they said, 'By God, you can count on us to keep it going,'" Strachan said. "Dennis and I told them 'we built the foundation, but it's up to you to build the house.'"