

Finder of Many Melodies

A Virginia night — January 13, 1864. Gathered around their campfires, wearied with the deadly bitterness of war, the soldiers of the Army of the Potomac seek escape in song from the reality of the present and the menace of tomorrow. What are they singing — the latest stirring war songs of those two Chicago composers, George F. Root and Henry C. Work, whose melodies have been so enthusiastically acclaimed by Union men and women who do not know war through personal experience? No; the men of the Army of the Potomac know war far too well to sing about it. They are singing a song of home, a song of the happiness of days gone by and of sorrow to come, a song fraught with despair at the inescapable tragedy of life:

The sun shines bright in the old Kentucky home,
 'Tis summer, the darkeys are gay.
The corn-top's ripe and the meadows in the bloom,
 While the birds make music all the day.
The young folks roll on the little cabin floor,
 All merry, all happy and bright;
By'n 'by Hard Times comes a-knocking at the door,
 Then my old Kentucky home, good night.

Hard-bitten veterans of Gettysburg, Indian

fighters from Minnesota, and all the mixed assortment of Yankee farmers, Bowery b'hoys, Germans from Cincinnati and St. Louis, and newly arrived Irish immigrants raise their voices in the refrain:

Weep no more, my lady,
Oh! weep no more today.
We will sing one song for the old Kentucky home,
For the old Kentucky home, far away.

A mile away, beyond the picket lines, come faint echoes of music from the campfires of the Confederacy. The Army of Northern Virginia is singing of the Swanee River, that half-legendary stream which has encircled the earth, flowing through the soul of humanity, and becoming the symbol of all mankind's vague, lost, wordless dreams, of joys that have vanished, of unattainable longings, of homesickness and timesickness:

Way down upon de Swanee Ribber,
Far, far away,
Dere's wha my heart is turning ebber,
Dere's wha de old folks stay.
All up and down de whole creation,
Sadly I roam,
Still longing for de old plantation,
And for de old folks at home.
All de world am sad and dreary,
Ebry where I roam,
Oh! darkeys, how my heart grows weary,
Far from de old folks at home.

According to Rossiter Johnson's *Campfire and*

Battlefield, this song, *Old Folks at Home*, was, next to J. P. Webster's pathetic *Lorena*, nearest to the heart of the Southern soldier.

Unknown to the thousands of fighting men on both sides who sang his songs so freely, on this evening of January 13, 1864, the composer of these heart-felt melodies had died that afternoon, in Bellevue Hospital, New York City. His fame of earlier years obscured by the tremendous national upheaval, Stephen Collins Foster passed away almost unnoticed by the American people for whom he had sung. Neither he nor his contemporaries realized his national significance. The passage of a century since their creator's death has proved their worth. If music can achieve for itself immortality, then the simple melodies of Foster will be heard for all time, in the noble company of the magnificent compositions of Haydn, Beethoven, the other masters, and a few gems of folk song like *Barbara Allen*, which, although delicate, has survived almost a thousand years of English history.

Foster's fame rests chiefly on his four great songs of the South, *Old Folks at Home*, *My Old Kentucky Home*, *Massa's in de Cold Ground*, and *Old Black Joe*. These beloved plantation melodies were intended to portray one race of people, one section of our country, one period in our history, yet through his genius Foster succeeded in creating songs which have leaped the boundaries of

space and time, and express universal thoughts and emotions. The best of his sentimental ballads are still sung to-day: his hauntingly beautiful *Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair*, his tender *Come Where My Love Lies Dreaming* and *Beautiful Dreamer*, recall the charm of an age which is past. *Oh! Susanna* and *Camptown Races* are proof that Foster possessed a sense of humor and occasionally sang in lighter vein. Other songs still heard to-day are *Old Dog Tray*, *Old Uncle Ned*, *Nelly was a Lady*, and *Nelly Bly*. Altogether, he produced more than two hundred original songs and compositions. About twenty of them, his best works, so combine the qualities of poetry, melody, simplicity, and sincerity that the resulting songs form a remarkable contribution to the music of our nation and of all mankind.

Foster was among our first genuinely American composers, in that his songs were American in theme, rather than imitations of the English and German music of his time. Born at the meeting place of North and South, East and West, he did not look elsewhere for his inspiration — he found it all about him. And he sang of the America that he knew: the American home, the sentimental emotions underlying the superficial practicality of the American temperament, life on the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, slavery, the slumberous plantation life. Because he generally knew what he was singing about, and felt it deeply, his best music

lives and breathes. To-day, one hundred years after Stephen Foster's death, his music is more popular than ever; schools and clubs study his life; articles about his work appear in newspapers and magazines; memorials to him are established in many parts of the country.

With the observance of the various centennial events of the Civil War, there has been an increase of interest, both in the history of Mid-Nineteenth century America, and in the music of men like Stephen Foster, who reflected the thoughts and emotions of those colorful and tragic years. The Civil War is the largest, most dramatic single event in our history — it is our *Illiad* and our *Odessey*.

In the lobby of the Library of Congress, in Washington, D. C., there stands a beautiful marble bust, the work of the American sculptor, Walker Hancock, of Gloucester, Massachusetts. It is fitting that this tribute in marble should be paid by the American people, because Foster is their composer, as no other composer is. The bust was unveiled by Evelyn Foster Morneweck, the niece of the composer, and by Sergeant Stephen J. Wigmore of the United States Soldiers Home in Washington. Sergeant Wigmore, a veteran of the Philippine Insurrection and World War I, was the chief sponsor of this memorial, and a generous contributor to its establishment. His interest in the Washington memorial had commenced in

May, 1941, when he had attended the dedication of the bust of Stephen Foster (also the work of Walker Hancock) in the Hall of Fame for Great Americans, on the campus of New York University. He felt that it was only fitting that there should also be a memorial to Stephen Foster in the nation's capital. For over a decade, he worked on behalf of this project and eventually saw it successfully accomplished.

According to Bruce Catton, the interpretation of the Civil War now lies as much in the work of the artist as in the work of the historian. Such writers as Stephen Vincent Benet, with his magnificent epic poem, *John Brown's Body*, have made the Civil War a living, breathing event in history, to thousands of people who are not interested in the works of historians writing of the technical details of battles and campaigns. Without intending to do so, Stephen Foster, as an artist in his own right, was contributing to our understanding of that tragic Civil War period.

To understand the unique place Stephen Foster occupies in American music, we have to see him as he was when he lived in Pittsburgh and Cincinnati. Foster heard the the roustabouts singing as they loaded boats on the levees of the Monongahela and the Allegheny and the Ohio, bound for New Orleans. So he wrote a song about a real steamboat, the *Glendy Burk* of the lower Mississippi River, which was:

. a mighty fast boat,
Wid a mighty fast captain too;
He sits up dah on de hurricane roof
And he keeps his eye on de crew.
I can't stay here, for dey work too hard;
I'm bound to leave dis town;
I'll take my duds and tote 'em on my back
When de Glendy Burk comes down.

CHORUS

Ho! for Lu'siana!
I'm bound to leave dis town;
I'll take my duds and tote 'em on my back
When de Glendy Burk comes down.

Foster heard other voices, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, crying, in both North and South, as the clouds of the Civil War gathered on the horizon. All of these voices, voices of America, sang again in Stephen Foster. Out of many voices he made one, and there has never been another quite like him. In all the places where true folk songs are made and sung, his songs are passed down from one generation to another.

On January 13, 1964, Jean Ritchie, a Kentucky folk singer, came to the Stephen Foster Memorial at the University of Pittsburgh to take part in a program honoring Foster on the one hundredth anniversary of his death. She told how her mother sang a Foster song, as she walked in the lonely hills of Kentucky. Her mother sang it in her own way. She had never been out of the hills, and she had never heard of Stephen Foster, and

she did not know where the Swanee River was. But when she sang "Way Down Upon the Swanee River," she sang it as if it were a part of her very heart and very soul. It had become a true folk song.

Of the many people who have been active in the Stephen Foster renaissance, no one has had a greater influence than the late Josiah Kirby Lilly, of Indianapolis, Indiana, founder of the Foster Hall Collection. Interested in Stephen Foster's music from early childhood, Mr. Lilly had done nothing about turning his love for the old songs into the active collecting of Fosteriana until he was about to retire from business, in the early 1930's. In a conversation with one of his sons, Josiah Kirby Lilly, Jr., a bibliophile, he mentioned the fact that he would have to develop a hobby, to take the place of the management of the family pharmaceutical business. His son reminded him of his early interest in Stephen Foster's music, and told him of a rare book dealer who had a number of first editions of Foster songs available for purchase. On January 5, 1931, Mr. Lilly acquired this music, and his long career as a collector of Fosteriana, an authority on Foster's life, and a sponsor of many Foster activities, was under way.

Mr. Lilly organized his Foster work in business-like fashion. He corresponded with Harold Vincent Milligan, who had written one of the first biographies of Foster in 1920, using the meager

records then available. He located members of the Foster family, including Evelyn Foster Morneweck of Detroit, daughter of Stephen's brother, Morrison Foster. Mrs. Morneweck had in her possession many family letters and other Foster material, inherited from her father, and she was able to give valuable assistance in the work of the Foster Hall Collection. He met Stephen's daughter and only child, the elderly Marion Foster Welsh of Pittsburgh, who was able to give him some first-hand accounts of episodes in her famous father's life. He formed a staff of assistants, in both Indianapolis and Washington, D. C., to help him in collecting, his cataloguing, and his research work. Walter R. Whittlesey, a research worker and musicologist, who had been on the staff of the music division of the Library of Congress in Washington, was of special help.

Mr. Lilly sponsored John Tasker Howard, one of the nation's authorities on American music, in writing the definitive biography, *Stephen Foster, America's Troubadour*, which was published in 1934. Ten years later, Evelyn Foster Morneweck's two-volume work, *Chronicles of Stephen Foster's Family*, was published by the University of Pittsburgh Press, also under the sponsorship of Mr. Lilly.

Joseph Kirby Lilly generously shared his hobby with the American people. The facilities of the Foster Hall Collection, housed in a little granite

building in his orchard near Indianapolis, were available to student, writer, and composer. His publications were presented to schools, libraries, clubs, and museums. Under his direction, *Songs of Stephen Foster*, edited for schools and general use, was published and distributed throughout the country and eventually on an international scale. He and his staff presented Stephen Foster programs in Indianapolis and other cities in Indiana, with a quartet specializing in the Foster melodies.

While Josiah Kirby Lilly was engaged in his Foster work in Indianapolis, citizens of Pittsburgh were planning to establish a Stephen Collins Foster Memorial on the campus of the University of Pittsburgh. This project was the result of the joint efforts of the women of the Tuesday Musical Club, the officers of the University of Pittsburgh, and community leaders. The chancellor of the University, John G. Bowman, Iowa born, Iowa bred, and a former president of the University of Iowa, became a warm friend of Mr. Lilly through his personal interest in Stephen Foster. When Chancellor Bowman told Mr. Lilly that a wing of the Foster Memorial would be devoted to a library specializing in Stephen Foster's works, Mr. Lilly promised to present his Foster Hall Collection to the University. In 1937, the year the Memorial was dedicated, Mr. Lilly made his gift to the University, and the Foster activities which started in Indianapolis have continued, from that day to the

present under the management of the University of Pittsburgh.

The Lilly Endowment, Inc., the family foundation established by Mr. Lilly and his sons, has supported the activities of the Foster Hall Collection, in the twenty-seven years which have passed since the Collection was moved to Pittsburgh. During World War II a special edition of *Songs of Stephen Foster* was issued by the University of Pittsburgh, to present to the armed forces of the United States for recreational use. Publication of this work still continues. From 1942 to the present, there have been eleven printings of this edition, consisting of approximately 750,000 copies.

One of Mr. Lilly's chief hopes was that Stephen Foster would eventually be elected to the Hall of Fame for Great Americans. He and his staff carried on a campaign calling on Americans to urge the election of the composer. When the election results were announced, in November, 1940, Stephen Foster was the only successful candidate in a field of 141! Mr. Lilly was the chief donor of the bronze bust of Foster, created by Walker Hancock, which was unveiled at the dedication ceremonies held in New York City on May 27, 1941.

Mr. Lilly's interest in memorials to Stephen Foster was not confined to his own work; he was always happy to lend a hand in the establishment of Foster memorials in other parts of the country.

Another Iowan who had a share in the Foster work was Dr. Milo Milton Quaife, a native of Nashua, and a renowned American historian. For many years, Pittsburghers had argued over the exact location of the site of the "White Cottage," the Foster family homestead in which Stephen Foster had been born in 1826. Dr. Quaife made a detailed study of the matter and issued a report stating that Stephen's niece, Evelyn Foster Morneweck, was correct in her claim that the "White Cottage" had stood on a plot of ground now occupied by a house at 3600 Penn Avenue, Pittsburgh. The "White Cottage" had been razed during the Civil War, and had been replaced by the house which now stands on its site. It is not the one at Greenfield Village in Dearborn, the fact which Dr. Quaife set out to prove or disprove.

In this month of January, 1964, thousands of Americans, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, have paid tribute to Stephen Foster on the one hundredth anniversary of his death. There have even been tributes paid him in foreign lands.

At the Stephen Foster Memorial in White Springs, Florida, a whole week of activities took place, in the name of the composer. A new edition of a Foster biography, written by the Foster Hall staff in Pittsburgh, and published by the White Springs memorial, was issued in January. At Bardstown, Kentucky, where the musical play, "The Stephen Foster Story," is performed each

summer, the composer of *My Old Kentucky Home*, state song of the commonwealth, was remembered with gratitude.

Throughout the nation, various groups observed the centennial in their own way. Hundreds of libraries held special exhibits of Fosteriana. Schools and clubs presented Foster programs. Radio and television stations broadcast the Foster songs and story over the air.

The Foster Hall staff at the University of Pittsburgh had planned special events for this important anniversary on January 13. These events were greatly hampered by the sudden and unexpected attack of wintry weather which struck Pittsburgh as well as other parts of the country and left the city snow-bound. On the afternoon of January 13, the Foster Hall staff struggled through nineteen inches of snow to place a wreath on the statue of Stephen Foster in Schenley Park, at half past two o'clock, exactly one hundred years to the minute after Stephen's death in Bellevue Hospital, New York. The memorial service took place with only a handful of people present because of the snow storm, where a full house had been expected.

Tentative plans are now under consideration for presenting this memorial service again, on January 13, 1965, to permit the hundreds of people who could not attend in 1964 — as well as the four missing participants — to be present. The centennial service might be a year late, but the

University of Pittsburgh pays tribute to Stephen Foster every year, on this anniversary.

Last year my son traveled around the world for an American foundation. Wherever he went, he left copies of the Foster Hall publication, *Songs of Stephen Foster*, in schools and libraries. Everywhere, he met with the same response: "Oh! yes, we know Foster's music. This is the American music we like best. We understand it. We know what Foster's music is all about." Around the world musicians of other lands pick up their instruments and play Foster's music in their own way, while voices sing the words translated into other languages. On July 4, the band playing in London at Buckingham Palace chose Foster's music as a tribute to the United States. An engineer from India, now working for a steel company in Pittsburgh, said recently, "I never liked western music until I heard Stephen Foster. After that, I learned to like Beethoven."

Like Robert Burns of Scotland and Franz Schubert of Austria, Stephen Foster of America belongs to the world. In January, 1864, shortly after Stephen's death, a writer in the New York *Evening Post* compared Foster with the Italian composer, Donizetti, on whose tomb is a modest inscription — "FINDER OF MANY MELODIES." These same simple words could well stand as the epitaph of Stephen Collins Foster.

FLETCHER HODGES, JR.