

THE PALIMPSEST

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VOL. XXII ISSUED IN DECEMBER 1941 No. 12

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The Iowa Eisteddfod

During the span of Iowa history many institutions and movements have contributed to the cultural welfare of this State. Some of these, such as the lyceum, the chautauqua, and the county fairs, have drawn their following from all classes. Others have been patronized only locally or by a single nationality or religious group. Nevertheless, these special instances of cultural expression, like the Welsh eisteddfod, have formed interesting figures in the tapestry of community life.

The eisteddfod, in modern times, is an annual assembly of Welsh bards and musicians for the purpose of encouraging poetry and music. Spirited contests in oratory, poetry, and singing are attended by large crowds and conducted with great enthusiasm according to ancient ceremony. More than any other custom it typifies the character of the Welsh people and stimulates their patriotism.

Eisteddfod, pronounced i-steth'-vod, means

literally a "sitting" or a session. Originally the object of national Welsh assemblies appears to have been political rather than cultural. This name was applied in the twelfth century. "About the year 1100 Gruffyd ab Cynan is supposed to have held a great national eisteddfod at the ancient town of Caerwys in Flintshire." The first one of which there is an actual record was a "grand festival with both poetical and musical competitions" held by Rhys ab Gruffyd at his castle of Cardigan in 1176. During the next four hundred years the practice was continued. The principal function was "to license or admit duly qualified candidates to the position of recognized bards or minstrels." This honor, attained through severe competition, carried many privileges, "among them the right to a billet which every nobleman was bound to respect."

Probably nowhere in the world has the poet and singer of ballads been held in higher esteem than in Wales. Cultivation of the voice has been regarded as a kind of civic duty. It might be said that Welshmen learn to sing before they can walk. Perhaps their natural vocal endowment and religious temperament would explain the development of music. No doubt the danger and toil in the mines have also contributed to this form of recreation. It is a type of artistic expression in which

everybody can participate and therefore it has given social as well as aesthetic satisfaction.

For a long time after the reign of Queen Elizabeth no eisteddfod was held, though the arts of music and poetry continued to be cultivated. Finally, in the nineteenth century it was revived as a competitive national festival, without the former political authority but retaining some of the ancient ceremonies. Since 1819 an eisteddfod has been held almost every year. Thousands of people from all parts of the country attend. The modern assembly is "designed to foster patriotism, to encourage the study of the Welsh language and literature, and to promote the cultivation of the ancient bardic poetry and music".

It has been said, "take music away from the Welsh people, and their national industry would soon become seriously affected." The miners who dig the mineral wealth from beneath the hills, enduring the hardest labor and facing continual adversity, have found spiritual sustenance in music. Other workers have been affected by the same type of cultural expression. Each community has its choral union and every Welshman has gloried in his "ability to take part in the great singing groups which characterize all Welsh gatherings", until singing has become virtually a national habit and Welshmen are everywhere noted for their

splendid appreciation and rendition of traditional and classical music.

This practice of the arts has instilled in the Welsh people a steadfast, conscientious love for their native culture. No wonder then that Welsh emigrants to America introduced in the strange environment those habits which were uppermost in their minds and dearest to their hearts. Wherever they settled in considerable numbers the old-country custom of holding music festivals was retained. And so the eisteddfod, transplanted to America, continued to exert a great influence in their lives.

Iowa was no exception to this rule. During the rapid development of coal mining in the last decade of the nineteenth century, Welsh miners poured into the southeastern part of the State by the hundreds, some from the older Pennsylvania fields where they had sojourned for a while and some directly from Wales. These latter ones had been attracted to the land of promise by the glowing reports sent from those who had preceded them.

The Iowa eisteddfod probably originated in the mining community of Kirkville in Wapello County. In 1888 the Welsh immigrants organized a Chief Choral Society led by Joe Reese and a Male Glee Section under the direction of W. B. Powell who

was said to be able to make a good singer of "anybody with a voice" no matter how inexperienced. There in the Congregational Church on Christmas Eve that year they gave the first concert which might truly be said to have commemorated the custom established in the old country. Religious and classical songs were sung both in English and in Welsh with a fervor and enthusiasm possible only for those who sing from the heart. In keeping with the tradition of the eisteddfod, original verse was recited by Morgan Davis and John R. Thomas who were the local "bards" appointed for the occasion.

About this time, however, similar groups were organized in other Welsh communities. In 1889 the Iowa Eisteddfod Association was formed and a singing contest was planned according to Welsh tradition. The meeting was scheduled for Christmas time in Oskaloosa at the Masonic Opera House. Delegations came from Kirkville and Williamsburg. Two full choirs of mixed voices, one directed by David Roberts and the other by William Soloman, represented Oskaloosa. Not only were there mixed choruses, but full male choruses, male and female glees, double and single quartettes, and various solo divisions, besides the customary declamations.

"Only the best music was employed" by the

Welsh singers. "Usually the classics were used regardless of their difficulty, nothing being too heavy for mastery by these experienced singers who had been brought up on this class of music from early childhood in the old country." For example the first contest number for full choirs at the Iowa eisteddfod in 1889 was "Arise all Nations, Sing unto God" by Handel. The rendition of this great anthem was so fervent and masterful that the audience was said to be overwhelmed by a wave of profound emotion. Later contestants were inspired by the effect of the opening selection to attain unexpected heights of perfection. Other favorite pieces were "Oh Father, Whose Almighty Power", "The Heavens are Telling", and similar religious works of Handel, Haydn, and Mozart.

From these small beginnings, stimulated by the interest in the annual competitions, the Welsh communities developed some remarkable choruses. Each year the enthusiasm grew, bringing more and larger groups into the contests. At first Oskaloosa was the regular meeting place of the eisteddfod. By 1892 the crowds were so large that special trains from Albia and Ottumwa were necessary to accommodate the contestants and visitors.

For many years, the work of the Eisteddfod Association of Iowa centered about the Welsh

mining community of Hiteman, which was located in Monroe County some five or six miles northwest of Albia. When the first shaft was started in April, 1890, many of the miners at Kirkville moved to Monroe County in the hope of better opportunities. Evan E. Thomas arrived as early as May 1st and W. B. Powell was not far behind.

So rapid was the influx of Welsh miners into the camp, bringing many skilled singers, that serious study of choral arrangements was undertaken during the first winter of 1890-91. By spring they were ready to give their first concert. "Queen Esther" was sung upstairs over the company store in Hiteman, to help raise funds for the building of the new I. O. O. F. Hall. The Hiteman singers practiced continuously and organized several special groups. By Christmas they were ready to compete in the annual eisteddfod at Oskaloosa. Eventually the choir had some 200 voices.

Eisteddfod associations had already been formed in other States, notably Pennsylvania. Similarly, singing contests were initiated wherever Welsh people settled — in Australia and South Africa as well as various places in America. The choruses were composed largely, though not exclusively, of Welsh and English singers, many with excellent voices that had been well trained in the old country. For the most part these organiza-

tions were patterned closely after their progenitors in native Wales.

In connection with the Columbian Exposition in Chicago an international eisteddfod was announced, the first of its kind ever attempted outside of Britain. Of course the Welsh singers in Iowa wanted to attend the great contest. It would serve as a tremendous inspiration and perhaps afford an opportunity of visiting with some friends or relatives from the homeland.

Daringly some one proposed that the Iowa Eisteddfod Association should be represented on the program at the World's Fair. This suggestion met with instant approval. After considerable discussion and correspondence during the winter of 1892-93, it was definitely decided that the trip should be undertaken. This was by no means an easy task for so new an organization. Committees and leaders were appointed immediately to perfect plans and rehearse the chorus.

Besides the musical preparation, which was of paramount importance, there was the more prosaic, though necessary, task of financing the trip. The cost of transporting nearly a hundred persons to Chicago and back, hotel accommodations, and meals would require more than \$1000, which seemed almost beyond reach. The several units supporting the enterprise employed various meth-

ods of raising their share. At Hiteman a big picnic was held in the grove below "Swedetown" to raise funds for the trip. A concert was given by the Hiteman brass band under the direction of Professor Powell. Stands were provided for the numerous concessions and for other money-raising schemes. Benefit concerts were also given in Oskaloosa, Ottumwa, and elsewhere.

The male chorus selected to represent the Iowa Eisteddfod was composed entirely of amateur talent, practically all laboring men, largely Welsh and English coal miners. All were individually the best voices which could be found in the various groups composing the Iowa association. Only two ladies were included — Miss Sarah Ann Williams of Oskaloosa, the pianist, and Miss Nellie Simpson of Albia, alternate.

For months in advance the individual members of each local contingent practiced regularly on the selected numbers and occasionally the members of neighboring groups met for a joint rehearsal. Included in the chorus were singers from Hiteman, Albia, Ottumwa, Oskaloosa, Evans, Beacon, Carbonado, and other communities. As the time for the contest approached, the entire chorus met about every two weeks at some central point, usually Oskaloosa or Ottumwa, for full rehearsals of the complete program.

The dates finally set for the International Eisteddfod in Chicago were September 6th to 9th. The Iowa party gathered at Ottumwa for final rehearsals in the afternoon and evening before the day of departure. A splendid picture of the group was taken, copies of which still remain among the most prized possessions of their owners. The officers chosen for the trip were: president, T. J. Phillips of Ottumwa; vice president, John W. Cauty of Oskaloosa; treasurer, H. L. Waterman of Hiteman; secretary, J. T. Kebler of Ottumwa; conductor, W. B. Powell of Hiteman; assistant conductor, David Roberts of Oskaloosa; pianist, Sarah Ann Williams of Oskaloosa; and assistant pianist, Nellie Simpson of Albia.

“Quite a crowd of relatives, friends and well-wishers were on the platform to wave farewell when the train pulled out.” Upon arrival in Chicago the entire party, including the members of the chorus, went directly to the Dombey House on Cottage Grove Avenue. The attractions of the city and the Exposition soon lured the contestants down town and along the Midway. They had come to see the sights as well as to sing in the eisteddfod. Some of them were absent from rehearsal which vexed the conductors and worried the officers of the group. According to one story, an anxious miner went as far as the loop looking

for his companions. Of each policeman he asked, "'Ave you seen anything of the 'iteman boys?'" No one was actually lost and all were present for the contest, undaunted by the competition of some of the best male choruses in the world.

The first event after the opening ceremony was the choral competition of male voices. For the first prize Evan Lloyd of Chicago offered \$1000, the second prize was \$500, and gold medals were awarded for the succeeding prizes. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, the choirs competed in the following order: first, the Cambrian Male Chorus from Pittsburgh; second, the Wilkes-Barre Male Chorus from Wilkes-Barre, Pa.; third, the Penrhyn Male Choir from North Wales; fourth, the Tabernacle Male Choir from Salt Lake City; fifth, the Gwent Glee Society from Edwardsdale, Pa.; sixth, the Rhondda Glee Society from South Wales; and seventh, Iowa's World's Fair Male Party from Hiteman, Iowa. John Thomas of London, William L. Tomlins of Chicago, and Dr. John H. Gower of Denver were the judges.

"In each of the choruses", stated the *Tribune*, "there was splendid tone and volume, and the selections were such as to show at their best the dramatic expression of the several choirs." The power and spirit of the Welsh choral singing was

perhaps best described by the word "hwyl", which signifies "that uncontrollable, bursting sense of elation, enthusiasm, zeal, high spirits and ambition which places the individual at the very utmost point of his desire to give his best to the world."

The Rhondda singers from South Wales won the Chicago contest for male choruses. The climax of the great International Eisteddfod was reached on the final evening when the Scranton Choral Union, conducted by Haydn Evans, won the contest for large choirs of 300 or more voices. The Salt Lake City Mormon Choir led by Evan Stevens placed second. Though the Iowa group failed to get a prize, their effort was not wasted. The undertaking paid well in experience and inspiration.

Throughout the years, the participation of Welsh singers in the music festival of the Chicago World's Fair remained a highlight, not only in the lives of the individual members but in the annals of the Iowa eisteddfod as well. The enthusiasm engendered by this trip was the bond that united the various Iowa groups into a harmonious association. It would be hard to find a musical organization that took its singing more seriously.

The success of any coöperative enterprise is likely to be the result of proficient leadership. There can be little doubt that the leadership of the

Iowa eisteddfod radiated from Hiteman. Perhaps groups in other communities became equally enthusiastic at times, but in most instances their interest was not sustained. And so it was that the Hiteman group, by indefatigable effort and enthusiasm, persisted in keeping the association alive long beyond the period when it might normally have expired.

A number of factors contributed to the dominance of this small community. In few other places was there such an abundance of superior musical talent and excellent direction by W. B. Powell, Joe Reese, and Evan E. Thomas. Hiteman, a rather isolated mining town, afforded few opportunities for recreation, and so the workmen clung to their music long after such forms of entertainment had been abandoned in most other Iowa communities.

Nevertheless, the singing contests were continued year after year. Many groups participated. While the Iowa eisteddfod did not reenact all the ceremonies appropriate in the native land, each assembly was conducted according to the manner and dignity of Welsh custom. In place of "Wales Gwlad y Gan", meaning Wales the Land of Song, the Iowa programs carried the motto "Columbia Gwlad y Gan". For adjudicators the most discriminating musicians were obtained.

During the earlier years these gatherings were held during the Christmas holidays, usually closing on Christmas Eve. While this time had the advantage of making the use of classical Christmas music appropriate, it had the disadvantage of severe winter weather. Partly for this reason the date was eventually changed to Thanksgiving, which was also a holiday of which the workers might take advantage.

To describe each eisteddfod throughout the period of thirty years while the institution flourished would not be feasible. A typical program will serve the purpose of supplying specific and characteristic details.

On Thanksgiving Day, November 27, 1919, the Eisteddfod Association of Iowa held the annual contests in the King Opera House at Albia. Judge Benjamin I. Salinger of the Iowa Supreme Court was President of the Day. The morning session began at 9:30 with Owen Thomas of Cromwell in charge, the afternoon session began at 1:30 with J. R. Price of Albia supervising, and the evening session started at 7:00 under the direction of C. C. Crawford of Albia. W. B. Powell served as president of the Eisteddfod Association. Evan E. Thomas was vice president; R. J. Phillips was treasurer, and Thomas W. Evans was secretary. Both Powell and Thomas had been active in the

association from the beginning. Daniel Protheroe of Chicago served as Adjudicator of Music. According to the printed program he needed no introduction for he had "adjudicated at many Iowa Eisteddfods, giving universal satisfaction on each occasion." In explanation of his qualifications the program declared that his "criticisms are keen, educational and absolutely unbiased. It is an art in itself to be able to select the best rendition of any competition, but to be able to explain so thoroughly the reasons why, is quite another art. In this Dr. Protheroe has no superiors." The Adjudicator of Declamations was David Strieff of Albia.

Secretary Thomas W. Evans, speaking for the officers and directors, announced that the association proposed "to give a silver cup this year to the choral society that wins the most first prizes throughout the day, and we feel confident that each choral society that enters the contest will do everything possible to win this magnificent cup, not for the intrinsic value alone, but for the honor of winning a cup of this kind." In addition to the cup, twenty-seven prizes for preëminent excellence in particular contests were offered.

A few of the principal events were:

Chief Choral Competition. "The Heavens are Telling", by Haydn. Not less than forty or more

than fifty-five voices. First prize, \$200 and a gold medal to the successful conductor; second prize, \$100.

Male Chorus. "Sleighbing Glee", by D. Rhys Ford. From sixteen to twenty-five voices. Prize, \$75.

Female Chorus. "It is Love", by Mrs. D. O. Evans. From sixteen to twenty-five voices. Prize, \$75.

Children's Chorus. "The Harvest Moon is Shining", by Maud E. Inch; and "A Water Lily", by Gertrude Knox Willis. Not less than twenty-five voices under fourteen years of age. First prize, \$50; second prize, \$25.

Prizes ranging from \$20 to \$5 were provided for male and female quartettes and vocal and instrumental solos. The list of events closed with declamations for adults and declamations for children between the ages of twelve and eighteen, and for children under twelve years of age.

Two pages in the program booklet were filled with Rules and Regulations, some of which are worthy of notice.

1. Competitions are open to all amateurs.
2. In the musical competitions any one is defined to be an amateur whose principal income is not derived from musical services. The director of a choir in competition is permitted to direct and sing with his choir while competing.

3. The adjudicator of any selection may refuse to award any prize or prizes, when in his or her judgment, the competition is not sufficiently meritorious.

4. Prizes may be divided between contestants, when, in the judgment of the adjudicator, merit requires.

Conditions entirely beyond the control of the eisteddfod officers made the postponement of the 1920 meeting imperative. As in other endeavors of this kind, once the momentum slackens, the interest subsides and the task of rejuvenation is difficult. Moreover, most of the leaders were growing old and the younger generation "knew not Moses". The Albia assembly in 1919 appears to have been the last held by the Iowa Eisteddfod Association.

Perhaps it was better that the long series of programs should have ended with this unusually successful festival than to have gradually died for lack of interest. As it is, the many annual competitions are yet a glorious memory to all who were connected with them.

BEN HUR WILSON