

THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY JOHN ELY BRIGGS

VOL. X

ISSUED IN MARCH 1929

NO. 3

COPYRIGHT 1929 BY THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

Some Songs of Long Ago

During the seventies and eighties there flourished in Iowa a pleasant and unsophisticated institution known as the singing school. It was at once an expression of the social inclinations of the community and an attempt to satisfy an instinctive hunger for music. Organs were rare and pianos almost unheard of, but the singing master and his tuning fork took the place of these.

The teacher was sometimes a local man who was noted for his "talent". More often, however, he was an itinerant musician, possibly of German extraction, who had organized a circuit of schools and rode from one to another on horseback. In this case he was a picturesque visitor to the community, and folks entertained him in the same style accorded to circuit riding preachers. The master of a series of singing schools in southern Iowa was the father of Paul Whiteman of modern musical fame.

Singing school started in the fall as soon as corn husking was over, and if there were enough pupils a second term was held after Christmas during the snowed-in months of January and February. Ten or twelve lessons usually constituted a term, but sometimes there were only eight, and the tuition ranged from a dollar and a half to five dollars for the course.

Though money was hard to earn in those days it was seldom grudged the singing master. Neither was enrollment hindered by the fact that certain young people lacked musical talent. The opportunities for courting were unexcelled, and could not be missed for a mere matter of dollars or discords.

Meetings were held in the schoolhouse on one or two evenings a week, lasting from an hour and a half to two hours, or until enthusiasm and lungs gave out. From twenty to thirty young people gathered for the occasion. Some one lit the flickering lamps along the wall. Another built a roaring fire in the round-bellied stove. The singing master stepped upon the platform and tried to silence the chattering group while they were still hunting song books or laying off wraps. Then an evening of music and merriment began.

During the first lessons of the term the pupils were drilled on notes and scales which were written on the blackboard. This academic training was passed over rapidly, however, for the older boys preferred to appear so hopelessly dumb in recog-

nizing "do, re, mi" that the teacher was sometimes driven almost to distraction. The next step in the process was the singing of simple tunes by note. This usually went better, and the master learned to overlook a lone "fa" when everybody else was singing "sol". Next came instruction in singing "parts", the bass, tenor, alto, and soprano holding forth in unison. Finally after several meetings came the more interesting songs with words, and the whole group was off on "The School House on the Hill" or "The Sing-sing-singing Skewel".

If there was no organ in the schoolhouse for accompaniment, the first note of a piece was given on a tuning fork or pitch pipe. Sometimes the teacher brought a fiddle and played the tune through once so that the pupils could get the hang of it. During the actual singing he would lay the instrument aside in order to gesticulate and otherwise direct his vocal "orchestra".

Such song books as *The Conqueror*, *Uncle Sam's School Songs*, *Golden Glees*, and *The Song Champion* were popular. They contained a miscellaneous collection of hymns, patriotic pieces, songs rich in morality or dripping with sentimentality, and a few selections that were full of old-fashioned fun. During a term the school sang through one of these books from beginning to end, thus probably turning from the rollicking strains of "The Hearty Laugh" on one page to the mournful cadences of "The Drunkard's Home" on the next.

But the pupils soon developed preferences and called for such favorites as "The Brave Old Oak", "Seeing Nellie Home", "The Husking Bee", "Freedom's Banner", "Revolutionary Tea", "The Sailor's Return", "Cousin Jedediah", "O, No, John", and "Riding on the Train". The latter was a lively, up-to-date piece which started:

Sun is shining brightly,
 Not a sign of rain,
 Oh, I'm going to town to
 Board a railroad train;
 Heart is beating wildly,
 Will not stop at all,
 Jolly, won't I ride fast
 On the "Cannon Ball?"

"Don't Leave the Farm, Boys" was also typical of the times. After warning against the sins of the city and get-rich-quick schemes, the last stanza mentioned the advantages of farming.

The farm is the safest and surest,
 The orchards are loaded to-day;
 You're free as the air of the mountains,
 And monarch of all you survey.
 Better stay on the farm awhile longer,
 Tho' the profits come in rather slow.
 Remember you've nothing to risk, boys,
 Don't be in a hurry to go.

Another popular song was "Dearest May". It was particularly pleasing if one of the girls was

named May, so that the boys could all appear mildly flirtatious as they bellowed out the words:

O May, dearest May,
You're lovely as the day,
Your eyes so bright,
They shine at night,
When the moon am gone away.

Of the religious numbers, the favorites were "How Tedious and Tasteless", "On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand", "Onward, Christian Soldiers", "Bringing in the Sheaves", and "Beulah Land". Every one knew these pieces by heart and sang with assurance. On Sundays members of the singing school augmented the choir at church where their week-day practice and training showed to advantage.

Usually the last meeting of the school was turned into a public entertainment so that the singing master might display the talent of his young vocalists. Held in a church or the Opera House, this occasion was serious enough to quell the boisterous spirits of the older boys while the girls were all aglow with excitement. Certainly the boys cast fewer sly glances than usual in the direction of the pretty girls during the singing of,

Gin a body meet a body,
Comin' thro' the Rye,
Gin a body kiss a body,
Need a body cry?

The repertoire for the "exercises" usually included a substantial hymn like "Rock of Ages", a melancholy piece like "The Last Rose of Summer", and a patriotic selection such as "Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean".

No final recital was considered complete without that favorite entitled, "We All Have a Very Bad Cold". This piece amused the audience, and sometimes tickled the funny bones of the participants to such a degree that they were seized with fits of laughter instead of spells of coughing and sneezing.

The Tenor now your Sol Fa Mi,
With vigor you must sing,
Let ev'ry tone be loud and clear,
This room with music ring.

Tenor

Excuse me, Sir, I cannot sing,
I am so very hoarse,
And ev'ry tone I try to sound,
Is very rough and coarse. (cough and sneeze)

Alto

O dear, O dear, I fear you'll scold,
I, too, have got a cold,
I cough and sneeze with perfect ease,
But cannot sing to please. (cough and sneeze)

Soprano

Oh, please, Sir, now my part excuse,
My cold is very bad,
And father says I must not sing. (cough and sneeze)

Bass

Who cares about your Dad.

Chorus

We all have a very bad cold, (bad cold,)
That's a story that has often been told, (been told,)
But with us you'll agree,
For you surely can see,
That we all have a very bad cold.
Yes, a very, (cough) yes, a very, (cough and sneeze)
Yes, we all have a very bad cold.

But whether the school was struggling with the intricacies of "do, re, mi", whether it had reached the "I Love the Merry Sunshine" stage, or whether every one had a "very bad cold", all the pupils looked forward to a happy evening at every meeting. The master was a benevolent tyrant whose scoldings were not to be taken too seriously. The singing furnished an outlet for pent-up feelings and high spirits. And what was probably just as important, the occasion itself offered an excellent opportunity for bashful swains to stand on the door-step until the fairest girl came out and then, with palpitating heart, ask to "see her safe home".

On fine winter nights bob-sleds and cutters would glide away from the darkened schoolhouse with the merry occupants singing in clear, young voices

Jingle, bells! jingle, bells!
Jingle all the way!
Oh, what fun it is to ride
In a one-horse open sleigh!

But such halcyon days could not last forever. As times changed, the singing school gradually drifted out of existence, until in the nineties it was little more than a memory. The love and the habit of singing had been planted, however, and Iowans continued to enjoy their own voices until the advent of the "talking machine".

During the later decades young girls took music lessons instead of going to singing school. A Story and Clark organ, with its walnut case and ornamental shelves for vases and family photographs, became an integral part of every well-furnished parlor.

Often after a big family dinner the party would gather round the organ in the evening for a "sing". Or perhaps the girls would be entertaining their "beaus" in the parlor and the family, partly to chaperon and partly to indulge their love of music, would join the group.

The organist might begin with that indigenous song of the great migration of 'forty-eight which had floated out from under the top of many a covered wagon as it lumbered across the grassy prairie.

Oh, then, Susannah,
Don't you cry fer me!
I'm goin' out to Oregon,
With my banjo on my knee!

Perhaps this was followed by one of the old marching songs of the emigrants.

Then o'er the hills in legions, boys,
Fair freedom's star
Points to the sunset regions, boys,
Ha, ha, ha-ha!

When we've wood and prairie land,
Won by our toil,
We'll reign like kings in fairy-land,
Lords of the soil.

After warming up on these pioneer tunes, some old Civil War music might be suggested and, with voices hushed by memories, the company would sing "Just Before the Battle, Mother", "Tenting on the Old Camp Ground", and "Dixie", that half-gay, half-plaintive song of the Confederate army. Both the lilt of the women's voices and the boom of the men's joined in,

I wish I was in de land ob cotton,
Old times dar am not forgotten,
Look away! Look away! Look away!
Dixie Land!
In Dixie Land whar I was born in,
Early on one frosty mornin',
Look away! Look away! Look away!
Dixie Land!

This would naturally lead to some of Stephen Foster's tender pieces. "My Old Kentucky Home" and "Old Black Joe" were usually sung. However, "Massa's in de Cold, Cold Ground" or "Old Dog Tray", sometimes took precedence over these. Sel-

dom was "Old Folks at Home" omitted for this touching song of common emotions had a wide appeal.

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.

If the southern melodies were pursued a bit further, "Darling Nelly Gray" and "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny" would be included. The men's voices would sound particularly mellow on

Carry me back to old Virginny,
 There's where the cotton and the corn and taters grow,
 There's where the birds warble sweet in the spring-time,
 There's where the old darkey's heart am long'd to go.

The women, on the other hand, would sing their sweetest on "All Through the Night", "Sweet and Low", and

Nita! Juanita!
 Ask thy soul if we should part!
 Nita! Juanita!
 Lean thou on my heart.

"Maggie, Air Ye Sleepin'", "Nellie Wildwood",
 and "Believe Me, If All Those Endearing Young

Charms" formed a group which the older folks loved to sing. They were particularly apt to insist upon "The Little Brown Church in the Vale", perhaps without realizing that it referred to an Iowa scene.

There's a church in the valley by the wild-wood,
No lovelier place in the dale;
No spot is so dear to my childhood
As the little brown church in the vale.
How sweet on a bright Sabbath morning
To list to the clear ringing bell;
Its tones so sweetly are calling,
O come to the church in the vale.

Bobby Burns was immortalized in the hearts of the singers by "Auld Lang Syne", "Comin' Thro' the Rye", or the sweet, gliding strains of "Flow Gently, Sweet Afton". Perhaps "The Blue-Bells of Scotland" and "Annie Laurie" were added to the Scotch collection.

When the young folks were satiated with slow measures, they would swing into a series of college airs beginning with "Solomon Levi".

My name is Solomon Levi
And my store's on Salem Street;
That's where to buy your coats and vests
And ev'rything else that's neat;
Second handed ulsterettes
And overcoats so fine,
For all the boys that trade with me at
Hundred and forty-nine.

Other songs of the same type which might be suggested were "The Bull-Dog on the Bank", "Three Blind Mice", "Good-Night, Ladies", "Sailing", and "The Spanish Cavalier".

Both the young and old folks enjoyed the gayety of a few old square-dance tunes — "Old Brass Wagon", "Turkey in the Straw", "Old Gray Mare", "Ain't Gonna Rain", "Captain Jinks", and "The Arkansaw Traveler". These melodies were fraught with happy memories, for the pioneers had stepped to them at barn dances and hoe-downs in their younger days. They were too good to lose and had been passed on to the second generation. And the third generation was also to know them, after they had been "jazzed" or "blued".

At this juncture some of the company declared that they were "sung out". The chaperonage visibly relaxed as the yawns increased. So the parlor, with its horse-hair sofa, its carpet of blended dogs and roses, and its wall paper striped with geometric flowers, was left to the young ladies and gentlemen.

Immediately the songs changed to a different type, for the craze for "popular" music had just spread over Iowa. Everybody whistled, hummed, or sang the latest rag-time hits, which often concerned an event or a characteristic of the day.

The "modern" repertoire of the singers probably began with the famous "cycling" song, "Daisy Bell", for the vogue of the bicycle was then at its height.

Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer, do.
I'm half crazy,
All for love of you!
It won't be a stylish marriage,
I can't afford a carriage,
But you'll look sweet
On the seat
Of a bicycle built for two!

Then followed "There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town To-Night", which was particularly popular as a band piece during the Spanish American War, and "Ta-ra-ra-ra Boom de-ay". "The Bowery", "Little Annie Rooney", and "The Sidewalks of New York" were sentimental east-side ballads which had caught the public fancy. Everybody sang enthusiastically,

East side, West side, all around the town,
The tots sang "ring-a-rosie", "London Bridge
is falling down;"
Boys and girls together,
Me and Mamie Rorke,
Tripped the light fantastic, on the
Sidewalks of New York.

A song of another type, but just as sentimental, was "On the Banks of the Wabash".

Oh, the moonlight's fair to-night along the Wabash,
From the fields there comes the breath of new-mown hay;
Thro' the sycamores the candlelights are gleaming,
On the banks of the Wabash, far away.

This was written by Paul Dresser, brother of Theodore Dreiser. Dresser, who preferred this spelling, was considered, next to Stephen Foster, "the father of the American ballad". "Just Tell Them That You Saw Me" was another of his successes.

"Grandfather's Clock" expressed a hearthstone sentiment. It was written in 1876, but was widely sung during the nineties.

My Grandfather's clock was too large for the shelf,
So it stood ninety years on the floor;
It was taller by half than the old man himself,
Tho' it weighed not a pennyweight more.

At least one such "hit" as "The Moth and the Flame", "Sweet Marie", "Daisies Won't Tell", "My Sweetheart's the Man in the Moon", and "The Rosary" was demanded in any group of songsters a generation ago. Perhaps "When You and I Were Young, Maggie" would be included. President and Mrs. Harding learned this song as young people and "thirty years later they used to sing it with intimate gatherings in the White House."

I wandered to-day to the hill, Maggie,
To watch the scene below;
The creek and the creaking old mill, Maggie,
As we used to long ago.
The green grove is gone from the hill, Maggie,
Where first the daisies sprang,
The creaking old mill is still, Maggie,
Since you and I were young.

Other popular ballads with less personal romanticism were: "Two Little Girls in Blue", "The Picture That Is Turned to the Wall", "She Was Bred in Old Kentucky", and "Only a Bird in a Gilded Cage". A flippant piece which was often appropriate to the occasion was "I Don't Want to Play in Your Yard". The chorus went:

I don't want to play in your yard,
I don't like you any more;
You'll be sorry when you see me
Sliding down our cellar door;
You can't holler down our rain barrel;
You can't climb our apple tree;
I don't want to play in your yard,
If you won't be good to me.

A few of the humorous ditties which served as antidotes for the "heavy-sugar" songs of the time were: "Sucking Cider Through a Straw", "Rastus on Parade", "The Cat Came Back", "Dan McGinty", and "Where Did You Get That Hat?"

"After the Ball", at the height of its popularity during the World's Fair in 1893, was sure to be sung in any informal gathering. It was one of the earliest examples of "a big smashing hit" and netted its writer the neat profit of \$100,000.

As perhaps the most typical of the pieces of this period, it was a fitting number with which to close an evening of song. The organist had probably reached the stage where she could pump the bellows

no longer, and the singers' voices had cracked and their throats grown tired. Besides, it was almost ten-thirty, and that was very late.

So everybody "wet their whistles" with a right good will for the last tune:

After the ball is over,
After the break of morn,
After the dancers' leaving,
After the stars are gone;
Many a heart is aching, if you could
 read them all;
Many the hopes that have vanished
After the ball.

PAULINE GRAHAME