

## NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

### THE BIOGRAPHY OF A PIANO

A PIANO MIGHT, to some, seem an uninteresting topic for a biography, yet in my estimation an instrument that has contributed much to the advancement of community life and helped to form a background for culture and betterment deserves such recognition. The piano to which I am referring is one in my possession—a Nunns and Fischer of 1839.

John U. and Charles S. Fischer, members of the firm that manufactured this piano, were grandsons of a Viennese piano maker who wandered into Italy in the late eighteenth century and made pianos that found favor with King Ferdinand I of Naples. Fischer taught his art to his son, who later studied in Vienna, and then returned to Italy and continued his father's business. Members of the third generation, John and Charles, followed the trade of their father and grandfather by becoming expert piano makers. The pianos they manufactured were masterpieces of tone, beauty, and brilliancy. But these two youths felt the inherent Fischer wanderlust and left Italy for the land of hope and fortune—America. After landing in New York in 1839, they immediately found employment with William Nunns, a successful American piano maker, and formed the firm of Nunns and Fischer. Nunns retired from the business in 1840 and the firm name was changed to J. and C. Fischer. The Nunns and Fischer piano was made only for one year, and in that time only a very limited number of pianos were produced. It is doubtful that many of these pianos are in existence today.

My piano has a walnut case of a small square type, measuring about six feet in length, less than three feet in

width, and thirty-three inches in height. It is supported by four shapely octagon legs, harmonizing with the entire design of the instrument. At such an early date the mechanism of a piano was comparatively simple, and this instrument has only a six-octave keyboard.

The piano was purchased secondhand in New York City by Shebna S. Young, a sea captain operating ships that carried lumber from Maine to New York, in 1849. He presented it to his daughter Elizabeth, later Mrs. A. D. Richardson, then ten years old, who showed considerable talent for music. In 1856 Young caught the popular spirit of "Westward Ho," gave up the sea, and pushed West. Down the turbulent Ohio River he went with his family and their belongings, including Elizabeth's piano. When they arrived at Cairo, Illinois, the bulky piano was transferred to a river boat bound upstream. During this process the piano was dropped to the bottom of the Ohio River by inexperienced rivermen accustomed only to handling barrels and crates, not huge pianos. With great effort and care it was lifted aboard, none the worse for its harrowing experience. It then proceeded up the Mississippi River to Prescott, Wisconsin, and up the St. Croix to Lakeland in Minnesota Territory. There for the second time the piano was dropped into a river, and again it was raised from the river bottom. Finally it was placed in the home of the Youngs! This Nunns and Fischer doubtless was one of the very first pianos to be taken up the Mississippi and St. Croix rivers. It is true, however, that a piano was taken to the Indian agency at Portage, in southern Wisconsin, as early as 1831.<sup>1</sup>

Lakeland, the destination of the Youngs and their piano, was in 1856 a prosperous little village with a large sawmill operating under the name of Staples, Merritt, and Young. Shebna Young was interested in the mill, then one of the biggest on the St. Croix. Lumbering was the great indus-

<sup>1</sup> *Milwaukee Journal*, July 31, 1932.

try in this locality; "by 1856 there were seven mills at Afton, Lakeland, and Hudson."<sup>2</sup>

The Youngs's piano created a stir among the people. They ferried across the river from Hudson and came from all the countryside to see and hear it; it was the first piano many of them had ever seen. While living in Lakeland, Elizabeth Young gave music lessons, for she was an accomplished musician who had studied in the East prior to 1856. Those who knew her recall that "Sitting at a piano playing and singing, there was nothing more beautiful than she."<sup>3</sup> After living in Lakeland four years, the Youngs moved across the river in 1860 to a site near Hudson, Wisconsin, now commonly called the Whitten land. There they set up housekeeping and again their piano was the center of attraction. Shebna Young saw the same Hudson that Caroline Martin Goss describes in her *Memoirs*: "Hudson was a tiny town; it was a bustling, busy place with sawmills on both sides of the river, and a heavy steamboat traffic, as supplies of all sorts came in by boat."<sup>4</sup>

The years sped along and death claimed Shebna and his wife. The piano was passed on to one of the Young children, who took it to Hudson. There it was placed in a home on Fourth and Oak streets, where it remained until the house was torn down to make room for a new school. The piano was then returned to the farm and placed in an unoccupied room of the farmhouse. Unused, it stood there until 1932, when Mrs. H. W. Miller of Hudson, in a conversation with Margaret Goodrich, a granddaughter of Young, mentioned the subject of pianos. In the course of time the piano was purchased by Mrs. Miller.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Genevieve Cline Day, *Hudson in the Early Days*, 35 (1932).

<sup>3</sup> Miss Margaret Goodrich of Hudson attributes this statement to the late Mrs. E. B. Williams. All personal data was generously given to the author in an interview with Miss Goodrich on December 27, 1937.

<sup>4</sup> See p. 32.

<sup>5</sup> Day, *Hudson in the Early Days*, 37.

What enjoyments and pleasures this little piano must have brought to the wilderness of the fifties! The influence and culture that came with it are of great consequence, for they provided a foundation for a richer life in the West, and gave to those who came in contact with the instrument a sense of refinement and an awareness of beauty. No longer does music come from its aged strings; for time has deprived it of its soul. Silently it stands, ornamented only with candlestick and silk shawl, recalling the glories of an era far removed—a mute reminder of pioneer music in the Northwest.

WILLIS H. MILLER

HUDSON, WISCONSIN

#### PIONEERING IN STEARNS COUNTY

THE WRITER OF THE FOLLOWING LETTERS, Albert E. Bugbie, settled in Stearns County in 1867 as a youth of eighteen. He acquired a farm at Paynesville, which was organized as a township in the year of his arrival. To George B. Greene, a friend living at his old home at Belchertown, Massachusetts, Bugbie sent the reports of life on the Minnesota frontier that appear herewith. Although he was enthusiastic about his new home, he pictured both its drawbacks and its advantages for the settler from New England. His correspondent chose to remain in Belchertown. He must, however, have found Bugbie's letters of interest, for he preserved them, and eventually they came into the possession of his daughter, Mrs. Ina Greene Gray. Recently she sent them to the writer's daughter, Mrs. R. F. Schwartz of Paynesville, through whose courtesy copies were obtained for the Minnesota Historical Society.

In publishing the letters, numerous references to people and events at Belchertown and to purely personal matters have been omitted. It should be noted that members of the family spell the name "Bugbee," though the writer of these letters preferred to spell it "Bugbie." B. L. H.



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