

Some Sources for Northwest History

MINNESOTA SHEET MUSIC

Philip D. Jordan

THE SONGS of yesteryear mirror well the tastes, aspirations, and folklore of a people. They reflect the grim determination of a nation on the march, ridicule prevailing modes of style, poke fun at legislators and lawyers, hold congressmen to scorn, praise political leaders, describe medical practice and phrenology, recreate the polkas and quick-steps of generations long gone, and exemplify heroic deeds and the patriotic sacrifices of loyal founders and stalwart frontiersmen. They are, indeed, true clues for the social historian interested in the narrative of music, classical and popular, or in the fascinating story of typography, engraving, and publishing.

The Minnesota Historical Society recognizes the almost endless possibilities of a musical collection and, through the years, has attempted to add bound books of song sheets and individual items to its holdings. The resulting collection contains music significant to the state and, in a sense, to the nation.

As might be expected, much of the collection pertains to Minnesota itself—songs that catch the tempo of a land o'lakes, of sky-blue waters, and of fertile valleys. Many of them were written by residents of the region, which makes them doubly interesting, for folklore and music by natives are always treasured. Others had both the words and music written and composed by visitors. Still more came from the pens of persons who never experienced, as residents or visitors, the Minnesota region. Included in these three general groups are: Francis H. Brown's "Minnehaha or Laughing Water Polka," published in 1856, which is one of the earliest items in the collection; A. A. Kelly's "Minnesota State Song," sung to the tune of "Marching Through Georgia"; James E. Osborn's "Hymn to Minnesota"; and "From the Land of Sky-Blue Water," with words by Nell Richmond Eberhart and music by Charles Wakefield Cadman.

E. H. Ellsworth wrote the words of the "Minnesota Song" and set them to the tune of "Tramp, Tramp, Tramp, the Boys Are Marching." One verse catches the spirit of the state.

With the nation's weal in doubt, council's hour and battle's rout
Bear the stamp of Minnesota's brain and brawn.
And while nations shall endure, with the hearts of freemen pure,
Press we on for truth and freedom's brighter dawn.

One of the most intriguing classes of music found in the society's collection is that written to accompany the showing of John Banvard's great panoramic scenes of the Mississippi. This "three-mile picture" proved popular both at home and abroad in the 1840's and 1850's. The music included "The White Fawn of the Mississippi River," published in London, with words by Banvard and music by Madame Harriet Schwieso; and Thomas Bricher's "Mississippi Waltzes," published by Oliver Ditson at Boston in 1847.

The society possesses about twenty bound volumes of sheet music covering the nineteenth century. One of these volumes embraces the period from about the time of the War of 1812 to 1816 and includes the famous "Constitution Frigate." Another, the gift of Mrs. Miron W. Skinner, whose family emigrated to Minnesota in 1857, contains sheets popular during the 1850's and 1860's. The major publishers and engravers are well represented, including Root and Cady, Oliver Ditson, Horace Walters, Thayer and Company, J. H. Bufford, Tyler and Hewitt, and J. L. Peters. Other items in the collection bear the imprint of Minnesota publishers in St. Paul, Minneapolis, and other communities.

Songs of the traveling troupes of family singers who toured America during the nineteenth century are represented by scattered items of the Baker and Hutchinson groups. But the bound volumes contain no large, or representative, group of family music. However, the society has microfilmed many of the Hutchinson family songs and, in addition, has on deposit much collateral material in the form of scrapbooks, diaries, and program announcements. All in all, the society's Hutchinson collection is one of the best in the country. It is to be regretted that other Hutchinson materials, now housed by the McLeod County Historical Society in Hutchinson, are not closer to

the main body of material in St. Paul. John, Asa, and Judson Hutchinson, from New Hampshire, founded the town of Hutchinson in the early 1850's. It was one of the many interests which carried them across the nation until their songs and music lifted them to the pinnacle of popular acclaim.

Another feature of the society's music collection is a file of clippings from the Minnesota press. Included are songs that have appeared in newspapers, which have been arranged in competent form and are easily available to visitors and researchers.

Although the music collection of the Minnesota Historical Society is small, it is of significance and value. Attempts are being made to strengthen it, and friends of the society are urged to turn over to it single sheets, bound books, or collateral materials, for in the society's collection they will not only be properly cared for, but will also be of genuine aid to the social historian.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).