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Operatic Pioneers

The STORY of the ANDREWS FAMILY

CORNELIA ANDREWS DU BOIS

THERE ARE people still living to whom the name Andrews Opera Company brings back pleasant memories. Perhaps they heard the company as young men and women, or as children they may have attended a performance with their parents. Many of them associate the Andrews' productions with the glamour of their first introduction to the theater and the thrill of hearing melodious music, which carried them for a time out of the humdrum of everyday life.

The Andrews troupe was unique in several ways. First, it was a family organization, and its nucleus always consisted of the Andrews brothers and sisters, their wives, husbands, and even children. Second, it sprang full-fledged from a frontier environment—it was not imported from the East or from Europe. Third, it pioneered in producing grand opera in English, and its performances were so moderately priced that the average man could afford to hear them.

Troupes like that organized by the Andrews made a significant contribution to the cultural and social history of the frontier West. Even when Minnesota was a raw frontier state, the Andrews' family concert organization was on the road, traveling by band wagon under hazardous conditions and playing in small towns throughout the Middle West. The Andrews started as a vocal concert troupe in 1875, and they added a cornet band and Swiss bells to their programs before finally emerging as an opera company in 1884.1

There were ten Andrews children. Their father, John Redding Andrews, was a Methodist minister who went to southern Minnesota from Russellville, Illinois, in 1856, with his wife, Delilah, and their four oldest children. Although they traveled by ox-drawn covered wagon, they took with them a carriage, some horses, a few head of cattle and some treasured pieces of furniture. Family legend says that the elder Andrews took to Minnesota a large coffeepot filled with gold coins saved while in business as a wagon and

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coffin maker. Supposedly he buried the coffee pot with its valuable contents beside his first log cabin. Thus John Andrews was considered a man of some substance among his pioneer neighbors, and his education, as be­fitted a minister, was above average. He did not, however, prosper as a farmer on his claim of a quarter section of government land. He had taken it in Le Sueur County, in the area known as the Big Woods, where the heavily wooded land was difficult to clear. He moved several times in this vicinity, ending with a small farm in the Lake Washington region, a few miles from St. Peter.

In his early years in Minnesota John Andrews was a circuit rider, traveling on horseback to preach in wilderness churches. After southern Minnesota became more settled, he had regular pastorates in various parts of the state. His family, however, did not always move with him.

Although the pioneer Minnesota background from which the Andrews children emerged was in many ways typical, the family had one treasured possession not usually found in frontier log cabins. It was a melodeon—a small organ-toned musical instrument resembling a harpsicord, which the father purchased at Munger Brothers Music Store in St. Paul and laboriously hauled home by lumber wagon, probably about 1862. This instrument became the center of the family’s musical life. It had a place of honor in the Andrews’ home, and the family gathered around it daily for morning hymns and evening prayers.

All the Andrews children could sing almost as early as they could talk. A double quartet of brothers and sisters sang the old hymns in such variegated harmonies that their father said he hardly recognized them! He himself had a fine singing voice, which was a great asset in revival meetings. The second daughter, Laura, was sent to St. Paul to study music, so she could teach the younger children. In addition, all the Andrews took advantage of whatever local instruction was available. Considering the meagerness of their training, their musical talents, which developed so impressively as the years passed, must have been distinctly out of the ordinary!

The Andrews’ background differed somewhat from that of their pioneer neighbors, for they had Spanish blood in their veins. John Andrews’ father, Thomas, was the son of an English West Indies planter and his Spanish wife. According to family records in John’s handwriting, Thomas went to Virginia during the Revolutionary War on a ship on which he was studying navigation with a tutor. After the latter died, Thomas settled in Virginia; he was present at the siege of Yorktown, and married a Virginia girl. Like many other pioneers, he migrated westward, going eventually to Indiana, where his son, John Redding, was born. The Spanish inheritance was reflected in the dark skin of all the Andrews children, and it may well account for their artistic ability.

IT WAS NATURAL that with their musical talent the young Andrews should participate in many local entertainments. The next step was the organization of a family concert troupe. There were several such troupes on the road in the 1850s and 1860s, including a branch of the famous Hutchisons known as the “Tribe of Asa.” This group of singers had given a concert in St. Peter in the spring of 1874, when the Andrews not only heard it perform but entertained the visiting artists in their home.

Charles Andrews, one of the four older brothers, took the lead in organizing the Andrews family concert troupe. After serving in the Civil War, with Company K of the Second Minnesota Volunteer Infantry, he joined Henry Moll of St. Peter in 1865 in touring with a dramatic skit called “The Recruiting Officer.” Apparently this experience gave Charles an appetite for the stage.

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3 The Andrews’ melodeon is now owned by the Minnesota Historical Society. It was presented by Florence Andrews Clayton in 1920.
4 St. Peter Tribune, May 27, 1874.
5 For a record of Charles Andrews’ military service, see Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars, 1: 144 (St. Paul, 1890).

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though ten years passed before he returned to the theater. By this time he had married and had studied and practiced law. Like his father, Charlie, as he was always called, had a good deal of personal magnetism, but in the son it was directed toward more worldly ends. He launched the family on the road as a concert organization in 1875.

At first, the Andrews gave only sacred concerts in churches, but it was not long before they added to their programs secular songs, comic skits, and even dances. Then they began to appear in schoolhouses and town halls. It must have been a source of embarrassment to their father when his children became members of a show troupe, for professional actors were definitely frowned upon by the Methodist church. It is known, however, that the father once defended his children before a group of ministers by saying that God had given them talent, and he saw no reason why they should not make use of it.

The family’s first tour took it to Nashua, Iowa, where the local paper reported on May 28, 1875, that “The Andrews Family Concert Troupe gave two concerts at Union Hall last week” with “a full house each time.” The writer explains that this “is a new troupe, have traveled only a few weeks, have first class musical talents, and with experience will rank high in their profession.” A local cornet band appeared with the Andrews at Nashua. After hearing this organization, the brothers and sisters decided according to the St. Peter Tribune of June 9, 1875, “to perfect themselves in the use of brass instruments, so that when they start out in the fall, they will have added to their attractions a good cornet band.” This action was typical of the Andrews. Throughout their long career as a family organization, they learned by experience and example, constantly improving and enlarging the scope of their talents.

— Quoted from the Nashua Post in the St. Peter Tribune, June 9, 1875.

* For an advertisement of the Leavitt’s St. Peter appearance, see the Tribune, July 5, 1876.

When the Andrews began their tours in 1875 they traveled by railroad, but during the summer of 1876 they acquired a band wagon in which to move from place to place. Of the type used in circus parades, it had tiers of seats rising one above the other to a high point in the back. The brothers and sisters probably got the idea of using this type of transportation from the Leavitt’s Swiss Bell Ringers, who appeared at St. Peter in the summer of 1876 traveling in a band wagon.

After hearing the Leavitts the Andrews decided to add Swiss bells to their own programs. To learn how to play the bells, Ed Andrews went on a short tour with these entertainers. Charlie ordered from Chicago a set of about eighty bells, ranging from small soprano bells to large bass ones. These were arranged on a long table with a velvet drop in front to conceal the legs of the performers.
usually four in number, who stood behind it. Many striking effects could be obtained with the bells. The Andrews were able to manipulate them and sing at the same time, a feat which seems to have been original with them.

The Andrews’ band wagon was red, with the name of the troupe, now known as the “Andrews Family Swiss Bell Ringers,” painted on the sides. To add to the travelers’ comfort, a canvas top was raised in bad weather, and warmed bricks often were used to keep their feet from freezing during the cold months. Four horses pulled the band wagon and two drew the baggage wagon which followed. When the troupe arrived in a town where it was to play, all six horses, their heads bedecked with plumes, were used to draw the band wagon as the Andrews paraded down the main street accompanied by their own cornets, horns, and a bass drum. During the parade, little boys ran beside the wagon distributing dodgers which described the performance the troupe had planned for the evening.

The band wagon was used by the troupe for two years. Sometimes it bogged down in sticky mud, and at least once it was necessary for the band to play a stirring march tune to encourage the horses to pull the wagon out of the mud. Finally, it had to be temporarily abandoned in the thick ooze of an Iowa road from which even the music-stimulated horses failed to budge it. The next season the troupe traveled by rail.

In 1879 the Andrews augmented the family talents by adding to their company Harry Eades, a comedian and monologist known as “The Man of a Hundred Faces” who had appeared earlier with the Leavitts. The family’s repertoire for that season, as recorded in printed programs in Florence Andrews’ scrapbook, was varied. One of these items describes the Andrews’ performance as “Undoubtedly the Most Refined and Pleasing Musical-Comedy Entertainment Now Traveling,” and it calls special attention to the “Domestic and Flirtation Sketch Artists, Edward and Florence Andrews.” Vocal solos by Laura and Florence, a cornet solo by George, a family quartette performing “The Ocean Breeze,” and a “grand finale” in the form of a “wonderful musical melange introducing the bells, vocal chorus and orchestra” were other features of the program.

“’The Yankee Phrenologist,” Harry Eades, appeared on another program presented on March 1, 1879, in sketches entitled “The
Broken Hearted Lover, and the Country Cousin,” while Laura Andrews sang “The Ship on Fire” and a ballad entitled “Must We Then Meet as Strangers,” and members of the family’s bell-ringing organization performed the “Silver Bell Polka” and other selections.

HOW DID this concert and bell-ringing troupe eventually become an opera company?

In the fall of 1882 the Andrews were asked to “band the town” of Mankato in their old band wagon to advertise the Chicago Choir Opera Company’s performance of “Pinafore.” In return, the brothers and sisters received passes for the first opera they had ever heard. They were so entranced that they immediately sent to Chicago for the score, and they hardly ate or slept until they had learned all the parts. Ed was Sir Joseph Porter; Laura, Josephine; George, the Captain; Florence, Buttercup, while Alice accompanied them on the melodeon. The only major part lacking was that of the tenor, Ralph Rackstraw. Since there never was a tenor in the family, the Andrews always had to hire one.

Enthusiasm for opera, even when combined with talent, could not of course, launch an opera company. The Andrews realized their need for experience in operatic stage business, so George and Ed responded to a shoestring opera company’s advertisement in the New York Clipper, a magazine for show people, and went to Chicago to get experience by joining the company. Although it soon disbanded, George took back with him to Minnesota two of its leading performers, both of whom had operatic experience in the East. He also went to Minneapolis to see the famed Bostonians in “Giroflé-Girofla.” This, with “Pinafore,” the “Chimes of Normandy,” and the “Doctor of Alcantara” comprised the Andrews’ original operatic repertoire.

All the Andrews needed now was money to launch their operatic venture! Then, by one of those fortunate combinations of circumstances, Charlie located in St. Peter a music-loving Englishman named Johnnie Colston. A member of a wealthy family, he had come to Minnesota to learn farming. With his backing, the Andrews were able to send East for costumes and to hire a small chorus and orchestra. They were prevented from starting out in the fall of 1883 by the death of their mother, but January of 1884 saw the Andrews Opera Company on the road. It gave its first performance in St. Peter, and the editor of the St. Peter Tribune, in reporting the event in his issue of January 30, 1884, declared that the company’s performance was “rendered to perfection.” He believed that “The troupe start out with the most flattering prospects,” adding that “Few if any companies that visit the larger cities

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PRIVATE Pullman car in which the Andrews traveled from 1887 to 1893
are their equal either in musical or dramatic talent, and they have given to their profession that study and drill which alone insures success, and which we trust the public will reward. Their costumes are of the richest and most costly kind, and nothing has been neglected to render their entertainment attractive.

Though local notices were kind, the early performances of the opera company were undoubtedly crude. As time went on, however, it must have become an organization with high artistic standards, for it received enthusiastic notices from critics all over the country and it is still held in high esteem by those who remember it in the Middle West. In addition to clippings from newspapers published in hundreds of Western towns, large and small, the family scrapbooks contain notices from such widely scattered cities as El Paso, Macon, Philadelphia, and Winnipeg. The list, which records the company’s movements from place to place, reads much like a railroad time table. The Andrews played in Minneapolis a number of times, with one six-weeks’ engagement at the old Lyceum Theater in the fall of 1891.

AS TIME PASSED the Andrews’ repertoire grew until it included about thirty operas. During their first years as an operatic organization, they produced many by Gilbert and Sullivan, and such light opera favorites as “The Bohemian Girl,” “Fra Diavolo,” and “Erminie.” Then, in the 1890s, the Andrews ventured into grand opera, playing first “Martha,” and then in succession, “Cavalleria Rusticana,” “Faust,” “Il Trovatore,” and “Carmen.”

All were sung in English. These sisters and brothers doubtless were among the first musicians in the United States to present grand opera in the native vernacular. This was due primarily to the fact that the company’s leading members were born and raised in America—they were products of a Middle-Western environment. There is a family tradition, never wholly authenticated, that the Andrews refused Enrico Caruso a place in their company shortly after he arrived in this country because he could not sing in English!

The Andrews constantly tried to improve their performances. They learned by observation, by experience, and by singing with guest artists, many of them of outstanding ability, who appeared with their company. George developed a magnificent baritone voice. Florence was not only an excellent contralto, but a fine actress. Ed was an extraordinarily talented comedian, at his best in such roles as Ko-Ko in “The Mikado.” Nevertheless he also appeared with the family organization in grand opera. After Laura retired, the Andrews found it necessary to hire a soprano, until Charlie’s daughter, Nellie, became old enough to sing the soprano roles.

Members of the family always formed the nucleus of the company, although in addition
to the artists who were hired for leading roles, several of those who married into the family had the ability to perform with the group. Alice’s husband, Chad Parker, and Florence’s husband, Fred Clayton, were comedians; Ed’s wives, Nannie, who was killed in a railroad wreck in 1892, and Caddie, who sang with the company in later years, were sopranos; Nellie’s husband, Charles Hazelrigg, was musical director; and George’s wife, Jessie, was a contralto.

Members of the troupe always traveled together as a family, carrying with them wives and husbands and children when the latter were not in school. In 1887 the family purchased a Pullman car which they divided into staterooms and attached to trains for their private use as they toured the country.

The Andrews never became rich, and they squandered their money carelessly, as stage people often do; but in spite of calamity, disaster, and death, they continued to operate as a musical organization for more than twenty-five years, at least fifteen of which were devoted to opera.

During their travels, the Andrews met with many disasters. One of the most serious transportation accidents in which they were involved occurred in the winter of 1892, when the special train which was to carry them on tour to California hit a split rail near Brainerd and was wrecked. The Andrews’ stove-heated wooden Pullman, in this case provided by the railroad, burst into flames. Nannie, Ed’s young wife, and the nursemaid for their two-year-old child perished in this accident. The child died of diphtheria a year later.

In the fall of 1893 Charlie was killed in a train accident near Chicago. Then in 1894 a fire destroyed the open-air theater at Sylvan Park in Peoria, Illinois, where the company had been staging seasons of summer stock since 1890. No one was in the building at the time, but all the Andrews’ costumes and music were destroyed—a heavy financial loss. Still, the company managed to survive, and in the following winter it toured the deep South under the sponsorship of the Georgia and Southern Railroad.

Despite tragedy and financial losses, in 1896 the Andrews, with George acting as manager, embarked on their most pretentious undertaking, when they built a resort hotel in their home state. It was located on Lake Tetonka, near Waterville in Le Sueur County, where the Andrews purchased 160 acres of land with money received as compensation from the railroad after the wreck of 1892. There the family made its summer headquarters after the Peoria fire.

Encouraged by the financial success of the Southern tour, they purchased in Kentucky an expensive race horse named Altouras, for they planned to have a race track and raise horses at Lake Tetonka. On its shores they built an elaborate sixty-room hotel, for which

![THE Andrews resort hotel on Lake Tetonka](image)
they went heavily in debt. Among the attractions of the resort was summer opera produced on a stage built out over the lake in the open air. The audience was seated on the bluffs along the shore among trees strung with Japanese lanterns. To reach the resort, the Minneapolis and St. Louis Railroad built a spur line to the Lake Tetonka resort and race track.

Tetonka Park, as the resort was called, opened with an elaborate celebration on July 4, 1896. Among the varied attractions advertised in the local press for the opening day were "Trotting Races, Pacing Races, Running Races, Bicycle Races, Yachting Races," steamboat excursions on the lake, water sports of various kinds, and "Two match games of Base Ball by first class nines." A wealth of music was promised too. Two bands and an orchestra were to play; an organist from Chicago was to give a recital on the resort's five-thousand-dollar organ; members of the Andrews Opera Company were to sing.

Guests were invited to choose between dining at the "magnificent Hotel Tetonka," or eating at the "reasonable price lunch counter." It was suggested also that one might carry his own "lunch basket and picnic under the trees on the grassy slopes or on tables in the grove." All were promised "plenty of ice water." The hotel dining room must have been well patronized on the opening day, for Florence later recalled that she and other members of the family were drafted to wait on table.

"As a fitting close to the great day ... a magnificent display of pyrotechnics" using "one thousand dollars worth of Pain[e]'s world celebrated fireworks" was staged over the lake. All these attractions could be enjoyed for an admission charge of twenty-five cents for adults and fifteen cents for children. Those who went to the park by railroad purchased excursion tickets which included admission to the park and its many amusement features. Special trains to and from Red Wing and Mankato carried the throngs of visitors who attended the opening. First-class entertainment was combined with perfect weather and good transportation, thus insuring the success of the occasion. According to a contemporary report, "crowds came fast until the Park swarmed with 5000 people."^10

Among the operas presented during the summer on the stage extending over Lake Tetonka was "Pinafore." For this production, the Andrews built a "Complete and Fully Equipped British Man-of-war" which could be approached in rowboats by the "sisters and the cousins and the aunts" who sang in the chorus of fifty voices. An advance notice announced that "Marines will Drill and a few Hornpipes from the Sailors may be expected" during the course of the musical entertainment on shipboard. To illuminate this nautical scene a "10,000 candle power calcium light" was used.^11

Although people flocked to Tetonka by special train to hear the operas, the resort failed financially, largely because it was run in such an extravagant manner. After a few seasons, the Andrews lost the hotel. Once more they put all their efforts into the opera company.

IN 1901 the Andrews were touring the Southwest with a "Carmen" company in which Ed, Florence, Nellie, Jay Taylor, and Jim Stevens were the principals. George joined them that fall for an engagement of several weeks at the Century Theatre in Kansas City. Immediately after that the Andrews Opera Company disbanded. Exactly why the troupe broke up at this time has never been fully explained. Ed felt the end came at least in part because chain
panies like that of the Schuberts were gaining control of the major theaters throughout the nation, and opera houses were no longer available to independent groups like the Andrews.

After the company broke up, Ed and George went into fruit ranching in Medford, Oregon. Florence and Nellie continued on the road for another five years with the Boston Ideals, an offshoot of the Andrews’ old company named for a more famous Eastern organization.

A few years later Ed drifted back into opera, continuing to appear on the stage for several decades, chiefly in Gilbert and Sullivan, with the Ralph Dunbar company and others, as well as in Chautauqua. In 1932 he appeared as the sheriff of Nottingham in a production of “Robin Hood” on the campus of the University of Minnesota, and as late as 1935 he staged and directed productions of “The Mikado” and “Pinafore” for the Minneapolis Civic Opera Association’s summer festival at the Lake Harriet Pavilion. His last public performance was as the major general in the “Pirates of Penzance” at the Mankato State Teachers College in 1934. He died in Mankato in 1941. Florence died at the age of eighty-nine at the Masonic Home in Minneapolis in April, 1952. Of all the Andrews who performed with the opera company, the only one now living is Nellie Andrews Hazelrigg, who resides in Santa Monica, California. Jay Taylor, for years the company’s leading tenor, died in 1952, well up in his nineties.

IN YEARS to come, there will be no one left who can say, “Yes, I remember the Andrews Opera Company. I heard George Andrews sing ‘The Heart Bowed Down,’ or I remember Ed Andrews as Ko-Ko, or I saw Florence Clayton as Carmen.” But the record of the Andrews will long be remembered. They proved that out of the frontier could spring more than the ability to fight Indians and grasshoppers, for they themselves emerged from the Minnesota wilderness.

Their organization covered a wide territory, playing in hundreds of communities large and small. These musicians were not above appearing in any town that would give them a two-hundred-dollar guarantee, and their seat prices never went above a dollar top. Perhaps the Andrews’ most significant contribution consisted of taking opera to the people—of producing grand opera in English for those whose opportunities to see and hear any form of entertainment, good or bad, were extremely meager. To countless people living in a new, rough country just emerging from its frontier beginnings they took entertainment and conveyed the sense of beauty and inspiration that comes from hearing great music.

Ed Andrews as Ko-Ko in “The Mikado”

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