



Music of the Pioneer Days in Nebraska [Part 3]

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Article Summary: This is the third of a series of articles that record the early musical life of the state of Nebraska, after white settlers began to arrive here. Written by the first DAR state chairman for the Advancement of American Music, it presents information from the DAR and other sources, including reminiscences from early white settlers.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Joseph Antone Willy, T J Thompson, Blind Boone, F J Hendershot, C B Coon, Miss Austin, Mrs A H Connor, F G Keens, Mrs Jennie Grant, Miss Lofgren, Mrs Amanda Swenson, George Ford, Mr Dean, James A Smith, Mrs George Smith, F C Grable, William Brumbaugh, E B Carter, Mrs Charlotte Barns, William Mason, Professor H M Draper, D O Urch, Sarah Tupman Conner, Emil Liebling, Dr Oliver, Clara Louise Kellogg, Hobart M Swan, Lenora Robertson Dennis, Professor B H Patterson, Horace Smith, William Guy Haxby, J W Gillette, Remenyi, Mrs Schalchi, H L Blackledge, Harry Johnston, William Sherwood, George M Cohan, Lewis Morrison, Maggie Mitchell, Dr Peter Dykema, Mrs George Munro, Mrs Strong, Eva Daniel Saunders, Mrs Dancaaster, Charles Weber, Chris Thomas, Cyrus Chapin, J K Gereke, George DeWitt, J A Parks, S K Wood, Mrs Frank Welch, Mrs J H Kehoe, Mrs Matthewson, Mrs Cora Beels, Charles Rouse, Rees Solomon, Fred Gale, H L Spalding, Charles E Watt, Louise Mears, Professor D B Worley, Henry M Blake, Professor Lippitt, Professor Boucher

Nebraska Place Names: Hebron, Kearney, Seward, Norfolk, Peru, Holdrege

Keywords: Swedish Ladies Quartette; Kearney Musical Society; Royal Conservatory, Stockholm; Tabernacle Choir, Salt Lake City; *Kearney Enterprise*; pipe organ; Henline Music Company, Kearney; Fisk Jubilee Singers; "the male Patti"; Carrington company; Jacob Chickering grand piano; Rosenkrans; violin; Knights of Pythias, Seward; Music Students' Club, Norfolk; Charles W Harris [publisher], New York; J Church & company [publisher], Cincinnati

Photographs / Images: Nebraska's first piano, Sarpy fur-trading post, Bellevue; Old Opera House, Kearney; Steinway grand piano; good Templars Lodge; Keens Home for the Aged, Kearney

Music of The Pioneer Days in Nebraska

Compiled by

MIRIAM STANLEY CARLETON-SQUIRES

(Mrs. Edwin E. Squires)

Broken Bow, Nebraska

Part III

HEBRON

In 1872, with Joseph Antone Willy as the director, the first band in Hebron was organized. This same Mr. Willy taught piano, violin and cornet; he wrote, among other compositions, "The Bells of the West."

T. J. Thompson and J. A. Willy conducted the early music stores.

"Queen Esther," with community talent, was given in Hebron about 1880.

Blind Boone gave a concert in Hebron that same year—1880.

F. J. Hendershot and C. B. Coon owned the first pianos that came into the community.

The Christian Church Choir was the town's first musical organization.

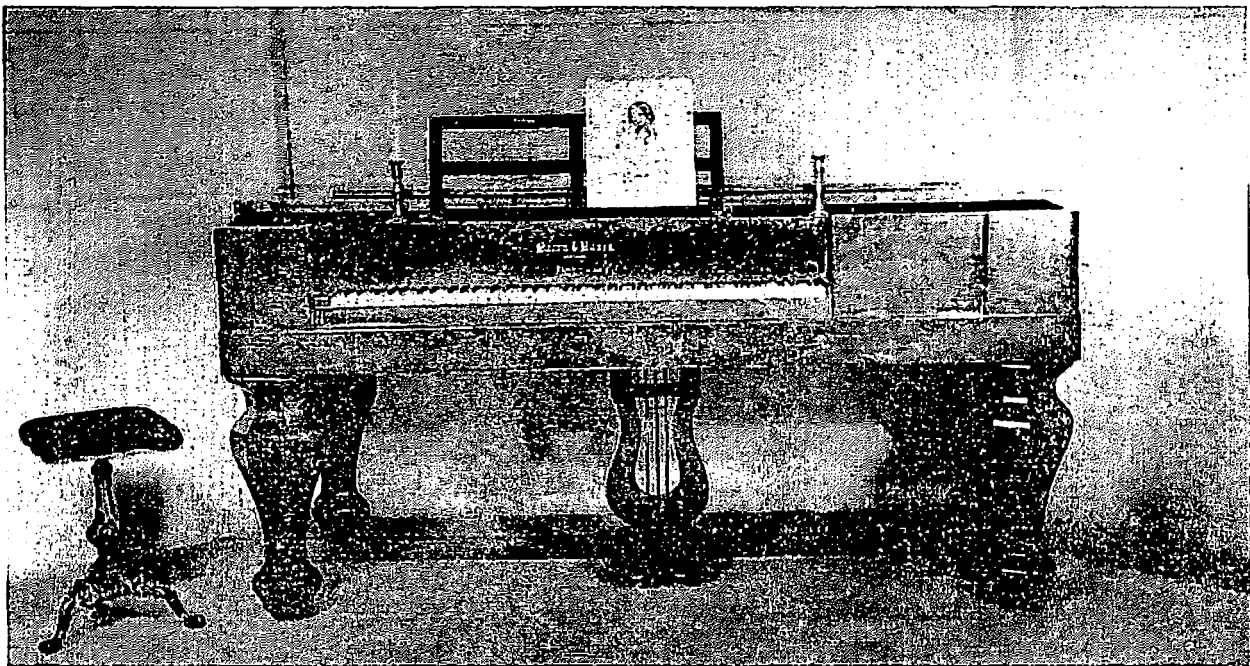
Miss Austin was the first supervisor of music in the public schools.

The first pipe organ was installed in 1890 in the Friedensau Lutheran Church.

KEARNEY

The first musical event of any importance in Kearney was the presentation of "Queen Esther." It was given in the frame M. E. Church building which stood on the same spot as the present one. This was in 1874. Mrs. A. H. Connor was Queen Esther, F. G. Keens, King Ahasuerus, and Mrs. Jennie Grant the organist. The presentation was given to crowded houses on two consecutive nights.

Gilbert and Sullivan's "H.M.S. Pinafore," given aboard a large ship anchored in Lake Kearney in the summer of 1889,



NEBRASKA'S FIRST PIANO

Brought from St. Louis by steamboat about 1854, it was the gift of Peter A. Sarpy to his niece, and known as "The Wonder" to Indians visiting the Sarpy fur-trading post at Bellevue. Presented to the State Historical Society by Mrs. Fenner Ferguson of Bellevue. This is probably the instrument of which Helen Martin wrote: "Among the antiques was a very old piano I ached to try."
(The song on music rack may be found on page 121. It is one of the Foster Hall Reproductions in the Nebraska Historical Society library.)

was the outstanding event of all. Miss Lofgren, a member of "The Swedish Ladies' Quartette," while visiting Mrs. Amanda Swenson (formerly in the quartette), sang the leading part. George Ford was Sir Joseph Porter, and a chorus of at least fifty of the best voices in Kearney, under the direction of Mr. Dean, participated. It was presented for three successive nights with great success. The regular soldiers of the army and the G.A.R. veterans were encamped here at the time and the officers in uniform attended, adding to the brilliance of the occasion. Hundreds of people were on the banks of the lake. Doubtless one of the reasons for its success was that it was given during the period of the "Boom Days"—1887 to 1890.

The Kearney Musical Society with a membership of seventy-five was the first musical organization. The director was Mrs. Amanda Swenson (mentioned above), who was Kearney's first vocal teacher. She was a graduate of the Royal Conservatory of Stockholm. She arranged a concert of local talent, the proceeds of which bought the first street lamps in Kearney. After leaving Kearney she became the director of the Tabernacle Choir at Salt Lake City.

In 1882 an English family named Till gave a unique program. They had gathered slabs of stones from various countries, measuring from six inches to six feet in length, which were on a frame and played with mallets somewhat in the manner of a zylphone. The scale was about two octaves long and of exquisite tone.

James A. Smith, a prominent pioneer of 1871, was the best amateur violinist in Kearney. It is said that he was Kearney's first real musician and a truly fine violinist.

Mrs. George Smith in 1872 owned the first piano in Kearney. In 1876-77 F. G. Keens, now of Los Angeles and in his 86th year, owned a Steinway Grand which was brought to Kearney by someone else a year or two before.

Mrs. Jennie Grant, in 1873 and 1874, was the first organist in the city. The organ used in the Good Templars Lodge from 1873 to 1883 was played by F. C. Grable and is still giving pleasure at the Keens Home for the Aged. (Mrs. Grant was the mother-in-law of F. G. Keens.)

William Brumbaugh directed Kearney's first band, organized in 1875.

E. B. Carter in 1877 operated the first music store and dealt in musical instruments as well as jewelry.

Mrs. Charlotte Barnes, who had been an assistant teacher to William Mason in New York, began teaching piano in Kearney in 1879.

Music was introduced in the schools of Kearney in 1888. Prof. H. M. Draper was the first supervisor and reported one thousand pupils in his classes. The school band speedily increased to sixty members. A girls' band was formed which Mrs. Draper conducted. Their students received credits for progress and attendance. After acquiring a certain number of points, these merits were cashed for money. He made no charge for this work and gave the money himself. He and his wife later moved to the west coast, adopted twenty boys, organized a band, and educated the boys from the proceeds of the concerts they gave.

D. O. Urch in 1889 was Kearney's first cornet teacher.

Sarah Tupman Conner arrived in Kearney from Chicago in 1889. She had studied for several years with Emil Liebling. The *Kearney Enterprise* stated that she was the most skilled pianist in that city at that time. She is now (1939) teaching in Los Angeles.

The first pipe organ in Kearney was installed in the Episcopal Church. The ladies of the church raised six hundred dollars, and the rector, Dr. Oliver (formerly chancellor of the University of Kansas), made up the required amount.

In 1890 Clara Louise Kellogg came to Kearney with her company and presented scenes from "La Favorita" and "Rigoletto." Hobart M. Swan was the city's first composer. His waltzes and two-steps were published by the Henline Music Company of Kearney. This city has produced many other composers of varying ability. Among them are Lenora Robertson Dennis, Prof. B. H. Patterson, Horace Smithy (who was educated in New York City), William Guy Haxby, J. W. Gillette.

Many musicians of renown have performed in Kearney. The Fisk Jubilee Singers came in 1889. A part of the proceeds from their concert was given to the different communities to help the cause of education. In 1898 Stuart, "the male Patti," dressed in "female attire," with his company, gave the light opera "1492." The Carrington Company of five people presented a program of patriotic music.

In March, 1892, Remenyi, the Hungarian violinist, gave a concert in Kearney.

In December, 1897, Blind Boone, pianist, gave a benefit recital for the Methodist Episcopal, Congregational and Presbyterian churches.

In 1898 Mme. Scalchi, contralto, assisted by Sig. De Pasquali and others, was heard in scenes from "Rigoletto" and "Il Trovatore." During this period also the fortunate citizens of Kearney heard—

In 1900, Innes and his band.

In 1901, Sousa and his band.

In 1906, William Sherwood, pianist.

In 1915, Evan Williams, tenor.

In 1921, Arthur Middleton and Marie Rappold.

From 1914 to 1935 Dr. Peter Dykema was guest-teacher for a week each summer.

Other noted musicians who visited Kearney were these:

In 1922, Anna Case, with Charles Gilbert Spross at the piano.

In 1923, Paul Althouse.

In 1924, Rosa Ponselle.

In 1925, Cyrena Van Gordon.

In 1926, Schumann-Heink.

In 1927, Thurlow Lieurance and his wife.

In 1931, Rudolph Ganz.

In 1931, Efrem Zimbalist.

In 1934, Margaret Matzenauer.

In 1936, Reinald Werrenrath.

In 1939, Maurice Dumesnil.

These are but a few of the nationally-known artists who have performed in Kearney.

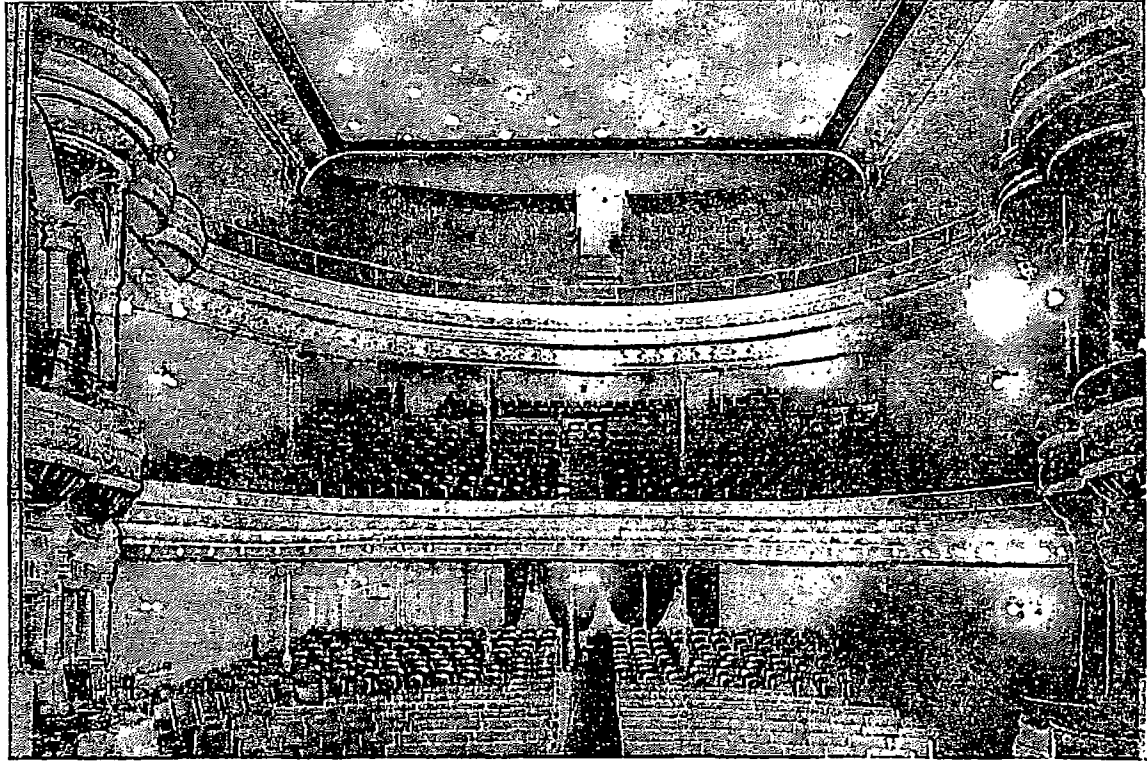
H. L. Blackledge of Kearney has a Jacob Chickering spinet grand piano dated 1810. It has been in Nebraska for 72 years.

Harry Johnston of Holdrege has a violin once owned by Abraham Lincoln.

Mrs. George Munro has a piano made by Rosencrans in Dresden, Germany.

Kearney's fifty-year-old, five-story opera house with its rough stone exterior, now used for offices, originally cost one hundred and fifty thousand dollars. The building was the only place between Omaha and Denver where road companies could rent a stage large enough for the production of their acts.

George M. Cohan, Lewis Morrison, Maggie Mitchell—these



THE OLD OPERA HOUSE AT KEARNEY

Courtesy Omaha World-Herald

were but a few of the players who thrilled audiences of two generations ago there.

One can still see the two large balconies and three tiers of boxes, and the once-elaborate star and cloud effect painted on the ceiling by New York artists. Pigeons and rats now claim the thousand plush seats which used to command from \$2.50 to \$5 each. Fifty years ago, capacity houses earned for its owners \$1,500 a month.*

"Mr. Barnes of New York" was the first production given there. Later, in "The Garden of Allah," real camels trod the stage while a sandstorm machine swirled sand-clouds around them. One production startled the theatre-goers with a horse-race, using a huge turntable.

All lighting was of the open gas-flame type. Gas jets, now electrified, make the place reminiscent of the 1890's.

When most of the old road companies and traveling shows were forced to shorten or stop their tours, an Omaha stock company gave fifteen-cent Shakesperian plays and minstrel shows. One owner installed a projection booth and did a thriving business screening silent movies when they were being shown at five cents.

Today a local theater holds a lease on the opera house and lets it stand idle. Backstage there is a mass of ropes and scenery-drops suspended from the roof, and a picturesque oaken circular stairway leads to the stagehands' catwalks.

SEWARD

The first pianos came into Seward during the 70's and were owned by Mrs. Strong and Eva Daniel Saunders. One of the early piano teachers was Mrs. Dancaster, who also taught the violin.

In 1875 or 1876 Charles Weber organized a local band in Seward and one in the country.

In the early 80's Chris Thomas, an early cornet teacher, organized a ladies' band. During that period also "Pinafore" was

**The World-Herald* of Omaha kindly loaned us the photograph showing an interior view of this opera house which once was the cultural center of a widespread territory. A note from Mrs. Squires now informs us that the weathered stone building goes under the auctioneer's hammer on July 12, 1940, to satisfy a lien for delinquent taxes.

presented by local talent, and music was introduced in the public school curriculum. Prof. H. M. Draper (who, it is said, was an outstanding teacher) was the first supervisor.

Cyrus Chapin conducted the first music store. Later (in 1881) J. K. Gereke, a violin teacher, carried on a similar business. It is said that he owned a valuable violin which is still in the community.

George DeWitt was a voice teacher in the early days.

J. A. Parks, the composer and music publisher, lived in Seward before moving to Lincoln and thence to York, where he now resides.

In the 90's the Knights of Pythias sponsored entertainment courses which brought fine talent to Seward.

St. John's Lutheran Church installed the first pipe organ in the city. By way of contrast it is recalled that previously S. K. Wood, a Seward pioneer, loaded his little organ onto a wagon and took it to church each Sunday so that the congregation could have music.

NORFOLK

Among those who first owned pianos in Norfolk were Mrs. Frank Welch and Mrs. J. H. Kehoe, an early piano teacher, some time between 1875 and 1877. Later (1880 to 1882) Mrs. Mathewson and Mrs. Cora Beels, another early teacher, had pianos. Mrs. Beels organized "The Music Students' Club," which was composed of both men and women.

At some time between 1878 and 1880 Charles Rouse gave violin lessons.

In 1880 or 1881, "Pinafore" was given in Norfolk.

Music was introduced in the schools sometime between 1882 and 1885, and Rees Solomon was probably the first supervisor.

In 1889 Prof. Fred Gale started the first music store in the city.

Six townspeople made up the first band in Norfolk, but only the name of H. L. Spalding, one of the members, is recalled.

The Lutheran Church was the first in Norfolk to have a pipe-organ.

In 1904 or 1905 Charles E. Watt, director of the Watt Piano

School of Chicago, gave a descriptive piano recital—the first concert in Norfolk by a professional musician.

PERU

(The following contribution is made by Miss Louise Mears, professor of geography at the State Teachers College in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.)

Peru, as the seat of the first state normal school and the place of the first commencement program in any Nebraska institution of higher learning (in 1870), early became a place of musical interest. Prof. D. B. Worley, one of the first instructors in music, joined the faculty in 1876-77. In 1879-80 Henry M. Blake took Mr. Worley's place as "Professor of Music." In 1880-81 Professor Lippitt succeeded Mr. Blake. In 1893 Professor Boucher followed Mr. Lippitt.

I have in my possession copies of two of the compositions of D. B. Worley. These are:

"By the Side of the Deep Rolling River." Song and chorus, copyrighted in 1865 by W. L. Story, Vermont; published in New York by Charles W. Harris.

"Flow Gently On, Thou Winding Stream." Duet and chorus, copyrighted in 1877 by J. Church & Company, Cincinnati.

Both of these songs were favorites with the students of the college, who enjoyed many delightful outings along the great Missouri River at Peru. Singing in these days was a popular diversion.

My copies of these two historic songs were the property of William Gaede of Peru (1862-1906), my uncle, a gifted musician whose greatest joy was in acquiring and learning almost all the choice music of the day, drawing around him in home and church the musical folk, old and young, in the community. He was the favorite accompanist in Masonic circles, in glee clubs and home-talent plays. All of his musical ability was shared with the public gratuitously. His collection of sheet music has real historic value. He spent the last five years of his life in Auburn, Nebraska. Music was his avocation, and banking his vocation.

(To Be Continued)