



Music of the Pioneer Days in Nebraska [Part IV]

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Article Summary: This article is one of a series that provides a record of the state's musical life. Its author, the first DAR state chairman, has included reminiscences of early settlers.

Note: corrections and additions to Part II of the series appear at the end of this article.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Frank Nedela, David Butler, Mrs R L Cornwell, H H Johnson, G A Gregory, Joseph Kopetzky, J C Prochazka, W F Sherwin, Mrs Edward MacDowell, George Aller, E J Walt, Albert V House, Ross H House, Homer C House, Cord L Aller, George H Aller, Ella Givens, Lydia Berkeley, Ethlyn King, Lillian Chase House, Jose Headstrom, Mrs J A Frawley, Lewis Headstrom, P W Elrath, Ashton C Shallenberger, Jane Pinder, Johanna Oehme, Jean Buchta Dickens, F G Keens

Nebraska Place Names: Crete, Polk, Stromsburg, Exeter, Fairmont, Grand Island, David City, Kearney

Keywords: Silver Cornet Band; First Nebraska Infantry; Chautauqua; Adelpian Male Quartette, Doane College; Richards & Company of Omaha

Photographs / Images: The Adelpians at White Cloud Chautauqua, 1895: George H Aller, Cord L Aller, Ella Givens, Ross H House, Lydia Berkeley, Ethlyn King, Homer C House, Lillian Chase House

Music of The Pioneer Days in Nebraska

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Part IV

CRETE

Nedela's Band was the first to be organized in Crete, with Frank Nedela its director. This Czech band became well known and played in various communities. It is said to have been the only band west of the Missouri River in the early 70's. It played in Lincoln at the last inauguration of Nebraska's first Governor, David Butler.

The first piano to come into the community was probably for the Crete Academy during the early 70's.

One of the very early piano teachers was Mrs. R. L. Cornwell.

The earliest known musical event of any importance took place in Crete in 1872, when H. H. Johnson organized a group of local singers and gave a successful concert. This group was probably the first musical organization, although it may have given only the one concert. Later, in 1877, G. A. Gregory organized a chorus which continued for some time.

In 1875 Joseph Kopetzky conducted the first music store.

The first military band was under the direction of J. C. Prochazka, who also taught the violin and cornet. It was organized about 1880 as a Silver Cornet Band, and in 1883 was assigned to the First Nebraska Infantry.

The first pipe organ in the city was installed in the old Congregational Church and was moved to the present edifice when it was built.

The early Chautauquas provided the first professional talent to come to Crete. Many musicians of renown have visited Crete, among them being W. F. Sherwin, the hymn-writer, Mrs. Edward MacDowell and many others.

Music was introduced in the schools of Crete about 1887. The first music supervisor was George Aller.*



THE ADELPHIANS AT WHITE CLOUD CHAUTAUQUA
1895

Left to right, standing: George H. Aller, Cord L. Aller.

Front Row: Ella Givens, Ross H. House, Lydia Berkeley, Ethlyn King, Homer C. House, Lillian Chase House.

* Mr. E. J. Walt furnished the following interesting information about Mr. Aller and his brothers in music:

The Adelphian Male Quartette was organized by five young men of Doane College in July, 1887, after hearing the famous Schubert Male Quartette at the Crete Chautauqua. The House brothers (Albert V., Ross H. and Homer C.) were versed in either first or second tenor parts; the Aller brothers (Cord L. and George H.) sang either baritone or bass parts. For five years they toured from coast to coast, and in summers sang on chautauqua and concert programs.

The quartette made remarkable musical history by singing for fifty years without change in personnel—perhaps a world record. Their last anniversary was celebrated in Denver in September, 1937. Today only George H. Aller, of Crete, is left.

Corrections and Additions

In courtesy to the author we set right certain errors in Part II of this series (Volume XX, No. 3, p. 169) discovered after the publication of Part III, and which Mrs. Squires above all others will wish to see corrected. Readers should refer to the author's preface (XX-1, p. 39) wherein she sets forth her aim "to rescue from oblivion some of the musical facts of the early days of Nebraska," and adds: "Much of what is contained herein exists only in the memory of those who were among the first settlers, . . . and the author acknowledges her obligation to those who furnished the valuable data. . . . While far from complete, this will serve as a beginning which I shall hope to add to and revise if additional information is obtained or errors discovered."

In an idle moment H. S. Robinson, researcher for the Historical Society, observed that the items listed under "Polk" in that issue belong not to the town but to the county of Polk. He reported:

Only the last two items could possibly apply to the village of Polk, youngest in the county, founded in 1907 when the Union Pacific extended its branch line west from Stromsburg to join the main line at Central City. Most of the items ascribed to Polk belong to Stromsburg. Quoting: "The first piano in the community . . . was owned by Miss Josie Headstrom, who is now Mrs. J. A. Frawley." But Miss Josie was the daughter of Lewis Headstrom, founder of Stromsburg, and her husband was a druggist and postmaster at that place.

Then: "In the early 80's P. W. Elrath conducted a music store." This was in Stromsburg, according to Nebraska gazetteers of that period.

Again: "The Silver Cornet Band with Mr. Pembleton as leader was organized in 1882. At about that time Ashton C. Shallenberger gave concert lessons." But A. C. Shallenberger settled in Stromsburg in 1881 and found employment in a general store at Osceola in 1882. He probably taught the cornet at both places, as contemporary newspapers show that both had bands at that time. Later he became governor, then congressman.

On the next page of same issue a last-minute change in page proofs resulted in an unfortunate transposition of the items for "Exeter and Fairmont," the first being last and the last, first. We endeavor to arrange the whole of this material in chronological order. The "printer's devil" is responsible for omission of the last item for Grand Island, reprinted herein. (Possibly his is the same satanic influence that cast a spell upon this entire section.)

Other readers have sent in additional items of interest which we print below. Further corrections and additions are invited, to the end that this may become a comprehensive history of Nebraska's early music.

GRAND ISLAND: Miss Jane Pinder has brought great credit to the musical activities of the city with her conservatory of music, and as an excellent teacher of the violin. (Completing XX-3, 171)

DAVID CITY: Miss Johanna Oehme gave piano lessons here for many years.

Mrs. Jean Buchta Dickens, formerly of David City, is now continuing her studies and work in music in New York City. (Additions to XX-1, 43)

KEARNEY: In 1940 Kearney's opera house was supposed to have been sold, but the proceedings were nullified by legal technicalities. In the spring of 1941 the building was again sold for taxes that amounted to more than \$14,000, the purchaser paying only \$7,500 for a building that was once the pride of the city.

In its heyday this gray stone structure seated more than fifteen hundred. It was built in 1890 by Richards & Company of Omaha at a cost of \$140,000. (In the original record this cost is given as \$150,000. — See page 87. *Ed.*) Its ground dimensions are 75 x 100 feet, and the cupola lifts its height to 105 feet. It boasted the first electric elevator in Kearney, and this same elevator is still in operation.

While there have always been business offices in the building, the auditorium occupies practically three floors. The parquet contained 128 old rose plush-backs. Twenty-eight of the best seats were sofas, accomodating two persons. There was also a dress circle whose chair backs were a combination of plush and carved oak. Draperies were of Edison blue, Nile green, and old rose. The ceiling was painted to represent the sky covered with fleecy clouds, and electric lights twinkled to represent stars. An interior view of the house is shown on page 88 of the original account. (Addition to XXI-2, 83)

F. G. Keens, who played King Ahasuerus in "Queen Esther" in 1874, died in 1939.

(To be continued)