



## Music of the Pioneer Days in Nebraska [Part 6]

(Article begins on page 2 below.)

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Article Summary: This is the sixth 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: J C Hunter, Bernice "Berna" Hunter, Delphy Hunter, "Cap" Fenner, "Fiddler Brown," Eugene "Genie" Chrisman, Congressman O M Kem, Silas A Holcomb, Billy Dunaway, Maxton Laughlin, Fred Ward, Siefert Lee, Joe Adkins, Morris Adkins, Frank Perry, Willie Stallings, Henry Pointer, Ellsworth Dutton, Ford Shaw, Will Swick, Oliver Swick, Will Myers, Will Mooney, Frank Doty, Stilman Gates, Mrs Carrie M Stevens, Miss Randall, C P Hubbard, Professor Benesch, Frank E Taylor, Mrs Ryerson, Mrs Reynolds, Mrs H G Rogers, Mrs Morrison Tucker, D O Luse, A W Gandy, Mrs George Trefren, Mrs Willis Cadwell, Mrs C W Gutterson, Mrs Mayer, Mrs Stuckey, Mrs Campbell, F W Blair, Mr McDonald, Mr Cassell, Mr Wendell, Fred Hewitt, Mr Crowther, Mr Bennett, Mr Hutchison, Mr Chapman, C O Brownell, Rev J Shepard, Miss Snodgrass, Miss Spence, Miss Lohr, Miss Beebe, Miss High, Nicholas Wiltamuth, Miss Josie Sheppard, E A Garlich, Frank E Taylor, Charles W Cole, Samuel W Cole, Miss Ada Bowen, Virginia Lamoureaux, Fredricka Weissbach, Miriam Stanley Carleton-Squires, Mrs James Lomas, Mrs E E Squires, Kenneth Headley, Hiram Palmer, Therese Leschetizky, Charles Kloman, J W Salisbury, B H Frey, J A Abbott, C P Hubbard, N Wiltamuth, Flora Gould, W H Greene, J W Parks, H F Meyer, Mr McCorkle, Mr Osborne, Mr J M Betts, Mr G F Betts, Grace Cox Purcell, Josie Shepherd, Ed Batman, Everett Moore, Charles Luce, Sam Shepherd, Ed Hewett, Wilbur Holcomb, Beatrice Adkins, Nora Adkins, Edith Pelham, Mr Dills, Mrs Alvin Daily, Al Simpson; D N Saville, Steve Sigourney, Charles Sigourney, H D Gibson, Alex Kohn, Walter Bruce, Eli Armstrong, Mr Empfield, Jay Saville, Al Hoover, Miss Randall, John Harris, H F Meyer; Bill Webster, Ellis Hanson, Billy Hanson, Lambert Webster, Eli Kitch, Homer Thomas, George Campau, Mrs Van Antwerp, Taylor Lewis, Katherine Bloss Welber; Ben Hardin, Homer R Hardin, Mrs Mary Deardorf, Mrs Babson, Miss Etta Goodyear, John Finch, Mrs Mary Deardorf, Mrs Ada Delano, Mrs Webb Lyon, M C Moon, George Richtmeyer, Mrs Frank Walton, Flossie Young Milburn, Calvin Lyon

Nebraska Place Names: Custer County, New Helena, Anselmo, Gates, Broken Bow, Round Valley, Rochester, Sargent, Omaha, Grand Island, Westerville, Oconto, Oak Grove, Arnold, Lee Park, Milburn, Arcadia, Merna, Gering, Loup City, Cedar Canyon, Berwyn

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# Music of The Pioneer Days in Nebraska

Compiled by

MIRIAM STANLEY CARLETON-SQUIRES

(Mrs. Edwin E. Squires)

Broken Bow, Nebraska

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## Part VI

### CUSTER COUNTY \*

A musical history of Custer County would hardly be complete without mentioning first the old-time fiddlers who used to play for early dances and entertainments.

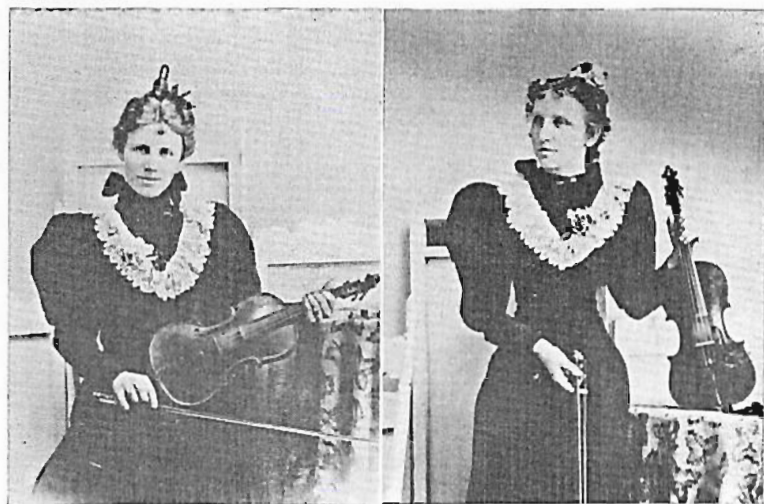
These entertainments were not announced in papers nor over telephones—the news seemed to travel by “grapevine telegraph” that there would be a dance at such and such a home on a certain night, usually Friday. As a rule, the young people announced there would be a dance somewhere. Saturday night was not popular because these dances were all-night affairs, the revellers going home at sun-up, and they did not care to break the Sabbath with dancing. The dances were attended by everyone in the family, from grandparents to babies. When “the young fry” got sleepy, they were laid in a row on the only bed that had been left up. The youngsters slept soundly through the noise of fiddling, calling, and stamping of noisy feet on the rough floor-boards.

J. C. Hunter brought his violin from Pennsylvania in 1879. For a long time he was the only fiddler in the neighborhood formed by New Helena, Anselmo, Gates and Broken Bow, where he played for all of the dances.

Mr. Hunter was very particular about his violin and never allowed his children to touch it, but when his daughter was twelve years old she used to “sneak” it out to a grove north of their home near New Helena and try to play it. By the time the little

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\* It was the intention of Mrs. Squires that all Custer County towns should follow the history of the county itself. Inadvertently this arrangement was disturbed by publication of Sargent and Callaway in Part V.



THE GIRL FIDDLERS OF CUSTER COUNTY  
"Berna" and "Delphy" Hunter

These were the children of J. C. Hunter, who brought his violin from Pennsylvania in 1879 and for a long time was the only fiddler in the neighborhood; later he was joined by Billy Dunaway, who played a second part.

Mr. Hunter would not permit his children to touch the precious violin—but Bernice *did*. She used to hide it and steal away into a nearby grove, and before she was thirteen confessed to her father that she could play many of his dance tunes. Then the proud father took her into training, and four years later had "Cap" Fenner order a violin for her—a "Conservatory" model at \$25. Mr. Hunter also taught Delphine to play piano accompaniments, and presently they had a three-piece orchestra.

"Fiddler Brown," once a pupil of Ole Bull, had come to Custer County from Norway, his violin under his arm. He was sixty-five, and young "Genie" Chrisman often played with him in public. It was but natural that in time Eugene should marry that other violinist of the prairie, Bernice Hunter. He died in April, 1943.

Above photographs were taken in 1895. In their public appearances the sisters (both blondes) usually wore identical dresses of black henrietta with ecru lace, and pansies whenever possible.

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girl was thirteen years old, she could play a number of her father's pieces, such as "Soldier's Joy," "The Campbells are Coming," and the like. When Mr. Hunter discovered this, he was very proud of his little girl's ability, and at various times they played together at the dances around New Helena, Merna and Gates. Through "Cap" Fenner, who was a real violinist living at Merna,

a very good violin was ordered for the little girl. It had a deep tone, excellent for orchestral work, and not at all hard for a young girl to play to be heard above other instruments. A sister learned to play accompaniments and then the Hunters had a three-piece orchestra. A bass viol was added and they took turns playing it for accompaniment. They played for many dances at the bottling house when it was in operation at the New Helena Springs, and for Fourth of July celebrations, picnics, and all sorts of social gatherings, Populist rallies, and the like. When Congressman Kem and Governor Holcomb came back to Broken Bow, the neighbors gave them a great ovation and Hunter's Orchestra furnished the music.

Another early fiddler was Billy Dunaway, a young man from Illinois, who played "second," as they called the accompanist at that time. He and Hunter had a number of favorites that they always played—"The Old Gray Mare Kicked Over the Whiffletree," "The Rose Waltz," "Soldier's Joy," "Fisher's Hornpipe," "Captain Jinks," "Buffalo Girls," "Irish Washerwoman," and other old dance tunes. There were many other pieces that Hunter learned while listening to the orchestra at Loup City, where he was carrying mail. He often took his violin along, and on one occasion was obliged to leave it hidden in a canyon near New Helena because he couldn't carry it on horseback. When he went for it later, he found that coyotes had eaten away some of the varnish.

Other players later came to the locality, one being "Fiddler Brown," as he was known in the Round Valley vicinity. He was a Norwegian homesteader, and had been a pupil under Ole Bull. He had played in a theater in Rochester, New York, when a young man, having brought his violin from Norway. His instrument was unique—flatter and longer than other violins; and, besides the usual four strings, had seven that fastened underneath the fingerboard. These were timed to vibrate with the other strings, and were very loud—so loud, in fact, that it was hard to hear the accompaniment. There were small, square cut-outs in the center of the bridge on the violin.

Mr. Brown was about sixty-five years old, and Eugene Chrisman, another old-timer with a violin, often played with him. "Genie," as he was often called, was a mere youth when he learned

to play. His father bought him a violin and this instrument is now owned by his grandson, Maxton Laughlin, of Gering.

Fred Ward played both the violin and the cello in early days; Siefert Lee, a Norwegian, was another fiddler. He lived in Round Valley.

"Italian Chris" played in Broken Bow in the 80's. He learned to fiddle on the streets of Italy when a boy. When playing, he held his violin on his knee upside down instead of putting it under his chin.

Joe and Morris Adkins, brothers, played for early dances in Anselmo and New Helena. Sometimes one of them sang as he played and called the changes. A popular waltz at that time was "White Wings."

Frank Perry was a good fiddler, and he knew a number of dance tunes of the better type.

Willie Stallings was another good fiddler. He lived near Milburn. He and Henry Pointer played for dances at Round Valley and Sargent.

Ellsworth Dutton played for dances at New Helena in the 90's, and so did Ford Shaw.

Possibly the first band in Custer County was the Gates Band. The members were Will and Oliver Swick, Will Myers, Will Mooney, fife-player, and Frank Doty, snare-drummer. Stilman Gates, a large, husky man, always had four horses hitched to a wagon to drive the band to the celebrations and other gatherings where they played. No picnic or Fourth of July would have been complete without their stirring music.

After Eugene Chrisman and Miss Hunter were married, they played for dances at New Helena, Gates, Round Valley, Merna, Anselmo, and Broken Bow—"The Oxford," "The Racket," "Firemen's Dance," and similar pieces.

The New Helena schoolhouse was the scene of many "literaries" (as they were called), children's day exercises, and revival meetings, when everyone sang and "put his whole heart into it."

The nearest place where one could hear really good music in the 80's was Loup City, which had (for those days) an excellent orchestra and band.

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Music was one of the marked features of pioneer life in Custer County.

More than in the average pioneer area, the musical spirit lived in the life of those early days. Religious meetings always thrilled with vocal and instrumental music. When the Farmers' Alliance-Populist movement started in 1889, it found a musical voice at once for all its rallies. The Custer County delegation to the state conventions always had the Cat Creek Glee Club and other musicians with the native, home-made topical songs which never failed to furnish enthusiasm. The Hunter Orchestra often appeared on these programs. At the first national People's Party convention, held in Omaha July 4, 1892, music from Custer County was one of the most popular features, invariably greeted with uproarious applause and encores.

Custer County furnished the first sod-house congressman, O. M. Kem; and later it furnished the first Populist governor, Silas A. Holcomb. These leaders in the great Populist movements of the time were given enthusiastic receptions on their return home from important occasions. The editor of this Magazine has very vivid recollections of his own contacts with the glorious music of that glorious day. Mrs. Squires cannot over-emphasize the importance of music as a leading element in the social and political life of those years. — *Editor.*

#### BROKEN BOW

The first band was organized in Broken Bow in 1880. C. P. Huppard and Professor Benesch were its early leaders. In 1894 Frank E. Taylor organized a band of twelve pieces and for many years directed it, doing commendable work.

In 1886 Mrs. Ryerson and Mrs. Reynolds gave piano lessons.

Mrs. H. G. Rogers brought a Mathushek square piano to Broken Bow in 1883. This was the first piano in Broken Bow and the second in the county. She later sold it to Mrs. Morrison Tucker, formerly of Broken Bow, who took it to the College View Adventist school.

On July 4, 1882, D. O. Luse, who lived near Cedar Canyon, brought the first organ into Broken Bow. A. W. Gandy had the second, and Mrs. George Trefren owned the first melodeon.

The writer has a program of a concert given in the Broken Bow Opera House July 1, 1888. It was under the auspices of the

Baptist Church. Among those who took part were Mmes. Willis Cadwell, C. W. Gutterson, Mayer, Stuckey, and Campbell; Messers. F. W. Blair, McDonald, Wiltamuth, Cassell, Wendel, Fred Hewitt, Crowther, Bennett, Hutchison, Chapman, C. O. Brownell and Rev. J. Sheppard; and the Misses Snodgrass, Spence, Lohr, Beebe, and High.

The first violin teacher was Nicholas Wiltamuth, the blacksmith. He lived in Broken Bow in 1892.

After the Hon. S. A. Holcomb was nominated for Governor on the Populist ticket in Grand Island in August, 1894, he was met at the depot on his arrival in Broken Bow by the Silver Cornet Band and the Cat Creek Bugle, Fife and Drum Corps, which appeared at all early-day political rallies. Thus with pomp and ceremony he was escorted to the opera house where the exercises were opened by a selection from the Arion Male Quartette, and Miss Josie Sheppard sang.

Music was introduced in the schools of Broken Bow in 1896, and Prof. E. A. Garlich was the first supervisor.

Frank E. Taylor opened a music store in 1900 which has been in operation continuously to the present day.

About 1910 a Bostonian, Charles W. Cole by name, son of Samuel W. Cole of the faculty of the New England Conservatory of Music, married a local girl, Miss Ada Bowen, and organized a conservatory of music here. The following courses were given: Voice, violin, piano, French horn, solfeggio, theory, and harmony. The personnel of the faculty included (besides Mr. and Mrs. Cole) the Misses Virginia Lamoureux, Fredricka Weissbach, and Miriam Stanley Carleton. Mrs. Cole, Miss Weissbach and Miss Carleton were all graduates of the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston.

There are many valuable instruments in Broken Bow. Mrs. James Lomax—*nee* Lyle Young—has a violin claimed to be an Amati; Mrs. E. E. Squires—*nee* Miriam Stanley Carleton—has a genuine Gagliano violin; Mr. Kenneth Headley has a violin which has been in his family since Civil War days.

Hiram Palmer as a trap-drummer travelled over the United States with various bands. Mme. Miriam Stanley Carleton-Squires has concertized all over the United States, studied in Paris with Mme. Therese Leschetizky, sang on various theatrical circuits,

is a pioneer broadcaster, and had a vocal studio in the famous Copley Square, Boston, for many years before marrying Hon. E. E. Squires of Broken Bow.

In 1892 Broken Bow had an orchestra, called T. H. E. Orchestra, composed of Messrs. Charles Kloman, J. W. Salisbury, B. H. Frey, J. A. Abbott, C. P. Hubbard, N. Wiltamuth and Miss Flora Gould, which played at the local dances, Easter hops, May parties, etc. In an early issue of the *Custer County Chief* its music was described as "simply superb!"

At about the same time Ansley had a cornet band and Berwyn a brass band.

In August, 1892, under the auspices of the Ladies' Guild, Professor W. H. Greene of St. Paul gave a piano recital in the North Side Opera House in Broken Bow, assisted by local talent.

"Pinafore" was given in Broken Bow in 1892. It is said that J. W. Parks of York, who took a leading part, "completely captivated his audience." Over \$90 was made from the presentation, and this sum was divided between the guilds of the Episcopal and Catholic churches.

In 1893 a brilliant social event was conducted by a harmony orchestra at Broken Bow's North Side Opera House.

That same year Professor Benesch, former leader of the Kearney band, took over the leadership of the Broken Bow Band, the Ladies' Concert Band, and the choir of the Episcopal Church.

At a concert given by the Broken Bow Band that year, mention is made of the piano solos given by H. F. Meyer of Westerville. They were appreciated to such an extent that Mr. Meyer was compelled to return after each selection. A cornet-flute duet by Messrs. Hubbard and Benesch on the same program was also greatly applauded.

In 1894 the Arion Male Quartette, composed of Messrs. McCorkle, Osborne, J. M. and G. F. Betts, was popular. They specialized in campaign songs and often were assisted by Miss Grace Cox (now Mrs. Emerson Purcell) and Miss Flora Gould, pianists and Josie Shepherd, vocalist.

In 1894 there was an orchestra of six pieces under the direction of Ed Batman, who played first violin; Everett Moore, who played second; Charles Luce, first cornet; Sam Shepherd, second; Ed Hewett, tuba, and Flora Gould, piano.

## WESTERVILLE

In 1884 D. N. Saville organized and directed the first orchestra in Custer County and gave lessons at Westerville. The orchestra's first appearance was at an Oak Grove Fourth of July celebration in 1885. Its members were Steve and Charles Sigourney, H. D. Gibson, Alex Kohn, Walter Bruce and Eli Armstrong.

Mr. Empfield gave vocal lessons in 1887, and Prof. E. A. Garlich of Broken Bow taught piano and violin at Westerville sometime before 1890.

Jay Saville gave violin lessons here in 1910.

The Ellison sisters who lived at Algernon still have the organ that they purchased in 1884.

Mrs. Carrie M. Stevens came to Ansley in 1886. She brought her Steinway piano with her and gave piano lessons in 1890 to the two Snell children. It is recalled that a Sharpless family brought a square piano into the community in 1885.

Al Hoover organized a band in 1889, and on July 4, 1890, it went to Westerville in a lumber-wagon to play for the celebration there. Several years before Ansley had a band, one from North Loup came to Ansley to play for a Fourth of July celebration.

Miss Randall taught singing in the Ansley schools in 1890-1891, and John Harris organized singing-schools in and around Ansley in the 1890's.

In *The Chief* of December 8, 1893, mention is made of the piano solos of H. F. Meyer of Westerville, who assisted at a band concert directed by Professor Benesch. His solos were appreciated to such an extent that he was compelled to return after each rendition. A cornet and flute duet by Messers. Hubbard and Benesch on the same program was also highly appreciated.

Ansley had an all-girl band in 1902.

## OCONTO

The first band in this community was organized at Lodi in 1886 in an old sod-school-house. Bill Webster was its first leader. He had been in the U. S. Navy and Marine Bands. Ellis Hanson was a member of this band as a flutist. He had played before

Queen Victoria, it is said. Billy Hanson the bass-drummer, Lambert Webster the flutist, Eli Kitch the snare-drummer, and Homer Thomas were a few of the members of this early band.

George Campau owned the first piano in this community in 1887 and Mrs. Van Antwerp gave piano lessons.

About 1887 or 1888 there was a singing school at the Lodi Evangelical Church, the singing-master being Taylor Lewis.

Music was not introduced in the Oconto schools until 1930 and Miss Katherine Bloss (now Mrs. Ray Welber) was the first music supervisor.

#### ARNOLD

Music was introduced in the Arnold schools in 1926, but there were singing schools as early as 1886.

Ben Hardin organized the first band in town in 1886 or 1887.

Homer R. Hardin in 1890 had the first piano in Arnold. The same year Mrs. Mary Deardorf gave piano lessons.

Mrs. Babson claims to have a violin which once belonged to President McKinley.

In 1876 Miss Etta Goodyear, whose father had a sheep ranch near the John Finch ranch, brought the first square piano to the environs of Arnold.

In 1890 Mrs. Mary Deardorf gave piano lessons.

#### LEE PARK

Mrs. Ada Delano, now eighty-one years old, formerly lived at Lee Park on the edge of Custer County. She has contributed the following information:

"I went to Lee Park in 1886 and was the only one in the community who could play an instrument, so, for all the local gatherings, it fell upon me to perform. The music-lovers would meet wherever there was a piano or organ in order to learn new or rehearse old songs for local gatherings, picnics, celebrations and farmers' club programs. By scouting around, we found some very good voices. Mrs. Webb Lyon, a soprano, who later was the soloist in the Vine Congregational Church of Lincoln, was a real "find." Messers. M. C. Moon and George Richtmeyer, Mrs. Frank Walton and others assisted. Later Mrs. Monte Milburn—

*nee* Flossie Young—came into our midst and gave more attention to music than the busy homesteaders could. Her musical education had been obtained in England and her tastes were refined. She was soon teaching the younger generation the rudiments of music. She organized an amateur band which later formed the nucleus of the Loup Valley Band at Arcadia. As Arcadia grew, the attraction of the town drew those who were musically inclined into the church choirs and similar organizations.”

Calvin Lyon organized a singing school in 1885 and continued at its head until his death in 1892. He was then eighty-five years old and had been a singing-master for over sixty years.

#### ANSELMO AND MILBURN

In 1887 Wilbur Holcomb, brother of former Governor Silas A. Holcomb, taught singing and reading of music. That same year Mrs. Frost had an Estey organ. In 1889 the Adkins girls—Beatrice and Nora—had an organ, and it is reported that Edith Pelham owned the first piano in Anselmo.

Music was introduced in the schools of Milburn in 1894 by Mr. Dills, but it was not taught continuously thereafter.

Mrs. Alvin Daily taught piano in Anselmo as early as 1896 and later, in 1903, in Milburn.

Milburn had its first band in 1910 and Al Simpson was its director. The first Anselmo band was organized in 1903 and directed by Bohac of Ravenna.

(To be continued.)