



## Early Music of Brownville: 1879-1892

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Article Summary: The author recalls various musical events, beginning in 1879 with light operas given in the Marsh Opera House. She discusses the Presbyterian, Episcopal and Methodist churches' music, as well as individual contributions to the "music scene" in early Brownville history.

### Cataloging Information:

Names: Joe McClary, Cora Gates, Mollie Furnas, Joe Decker, Clara Mercer, Jimmie McNaughton, Fannie Arnold, Marie Hoover, Robert W Furnas, Leila Crane, Minnie Rainey, Celia Furnas, Joe Decker, Sarah Graham, Edward Lippett, Helen Hoover, Kate Shurtz, May Worthing, Lillian Worthing, Bert Talbott, Mr Chapelow, Mr Williams, James R Dye, Anna Dye, Florence Dye, Pearl Minick, Helen Hitt, Mrs Alice Minick, Mollie Bratton, Collie McInnich, Ed Grant, Lucy Manville House, Frank Nedela, Frank Nedela Jr, Karl Nedela, Rose Rosicky, Stephen Jelinek, Annadora Gregory, J C Prochaska, Joseph Franta, George Aller, Howard Hanson, Canon Talbott

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## Early Music of Brownville — 1879-1892

SALLIE L. FURNAS

On a Memorial Day visit to Brownville and Nemaha County (1942), I recalled many happy days of my childhood. For that was my birthplace. We passed the old Furnas farm west of Brownville where I first saw the light of day. We drove up the Furnas hill, where I used to enjoy fine sled-rides when the temperature was below zero and the banks of snow glistened in the sunlight. Then those sleigh-rides at night when we serenaded the community! We were packed in a bobsled like sardines, with plenty of comforters, and straw on the floor, while the bells jingled merrily and the gorgeous moon lighted our way.

The old settlers of Brownville would have stood in awe at the sight of that wonderful bridge which now spans the Missouri. Who would have thought, when we used to cross to Phelps in those tiny skiffs, with "Coon" McClary at the oars, that an architect would construct one of the finest bridges in the United States to carry us swiftly and far more safely across the old Missouri? Parties of us used to go over to gather pawpaws and red haws. The high tenor voice of Joe McClary ("Coon," as he was nicknamed) would ring out over the water. If an impresario could have heard his rich, beautiful tones we might have had another Caruso or Martinelli.

The first remembrance I have of any musical events during 1879 and 1880 is of the delightful light operas given in the Marsh Opera House. "Pinafore," with Cora Gates as leading lady; Mollie Furnas as Little Buttercup, Joe Decker as Sir Joseph Porter, and a chorus with Clara Mercer as leader of the "sisters, cousins and aunts." "The Mikado," "The Sorcerer," and many others were given in Brownville and surrounding towns. Jimmie McNaughton, nephew of John L. Carson, used to shine as a star. Then, on the return of Fannie Arnold from Boston, we had real grand opera.

When Marie Hoover graduated from Boston with honors and received the gold medal at the New England Conservatory of Music, she was received with high acclaim by her townspeople.

We all studied piano with her, and well do I remember how I labored with the fingering of Mendelssohn's *Rondo Capriccioso*.

About this time (in 1885) my grandfather, Robert W. Furnas, was appointed Commissioner from Nebraska to the Cotton Centennial at New Orleans. So we went down there to enjoy the great Exposition. In my childish voice I used to sing "Baby Mine" and "The Boot-Black's Song" for the guests at the boarding house on Carondelot Street. These were two of Grandfather's favorites — also "Old Black Joe" and "Oh Dem Golden Slippers." Not exactly of the classical type — but I have seen him get up and leave a most important newspaper conference when he heard the first strains of those particular songs.

On our return to Brownville I began a course of real singing lessons with Belle Bailey, who had been East to study the latest methods. She had a birdlike voice, very high and resonant. So when she taught me "I'm a Merry, Merry, Laughing Girl," I was given a place on the program at the old "op'ry house." I was scared stiff! Rather young to be singing in public, and my ambition to become a singer got quite a jolt that night.

So I turned to the piano again. Leila Crane was just home from Virginia and her exquisite playing captivated the Brownville folk. The instruction I received was thorough and constructive, and I practiced faithfully without coaxing.

The Presbyterian Choir at that time consisted of Minnie Rainey, soprano; Celia Furnas, alto; Ed Lippett, tenor; Joe Decker, bass; with Mrs. Sarah Graham, one of our most successful piano teachers, as organist. I remember sitting next to Grandfather, on those hot Sabbath mornings, swatting flies with a big palmleaf fan and watching Joe Decker make those funny faces when he hit a high note.

The young musicians of Brownville, who in later years became finished singers, owe a debt of gratitude to Edward Lippett,\* who not only gave private lessons but conducted a singing-school throughout the county. He drove from place to place, and I can see him now as he stood in front of us with his tuning fork raised for the first beat on those stirring choruses.

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\* Edward Lippett was a brother of Mrs. Sarah Graham. They were a very musical family. He was Director of Music at the State Normal School in Peru for many years, and is known as a composer of beautiful songs.

Then came my time to play the organ in church. For, on the arrival of Canon Talbott as rector of our Episcopal Church, I was given the honor of playing the reed organ at the age of fourteen. I have the Bible today that was presented to me on Christmas Day, 1888, for my services gratuitously rendered in that chapel. Mrs. William Hoover, Helen Hoover, Kate Shurtz, May and Lillian Worthing, Messrs. Chapelow and Williams and Bert Talbott constituted our choir.

James R. Dye and his two talented daughters, residents of Brownville in the late '70s and '80s, organized an orchestra: violin, cello and piano. They gave concerts in various Nebraska towns and were leading lights in the musical life of the community. Anna played the piano and Florence was the possessor of a high operatic soprano voice. "Jim" Dye, as we all called him, used to tune our pianos regularly each year and was thoroughly dependable.

The musical life of Brownville would not be truly recorded without mention of Pearl Minick and Helen Hiitt, adopted daughters of Mrs. Alice Minick. They were given the finest advantages in music and have held positions of prominence.

Both the Presbyterian and Episcopal churches discontinued their services and the buildings were finally torn down, so in 1890 we transferred our talents to the Methodist Church. Celia Furnas was organist; Mollie Bratton and I, sopranos; Kate Shurtz, alto; Collie McInnich, tenor; Ed Grant, bass. We had such good times at choir practice, for we met at different homes and enjoyed refreshments after our singing period was over. That little red brick church still stands on the hill, a reminder of the days long ago when Brownville was the center of all cultural and social activities in southeastern Nebraska. It is the oldest church in the state.

In the early nineties we moved to Lincoln, where I continued my voice work in the University. Later I studied in Chicago and New York, and have spent the past forty years in California. But I feel I was particularly favored in my early association with some of the outstanding musicians of that day, who have passed on to their reward with a magnificent record of high standards in their chosen profession.

## Editor's Note

In concluding this excellent historical series, which has aroused wide interest, two personal letters are in keeping. Both bear August dates. One is from Lucy Manville House, living at No. 82 Witherspoon Street in Princeton, New Jersey. This, and its answer, are here given:

Dear Dr. Sheldon:

When Lillian Chase House was with me I wrote, at her request, to Miss Agnes Aksamit at Crete, suggesting that she was exactly the right person to write up the Czech bands of Crete and vicinity. The enclosed is a copy of her letter.

Since Mrs. House is having so much difficulty with her eyes, I am sending this direct to you. I do not know what use you will care to make of it, nor how much more material could be found if you mined in the right place, but it seems interesting and likely to be forgotten in a short time. I am quite in sympathy with these efforts to catch the past while those are still with us who knew those days at first hand. Long may your banner wave!

Your friend,  
LUCY MANVILLE HOUSE.

Dear Mrs. House:

Yes, I well remember the Adelpian Quartette. Three of them, at one time or another, were classmates of mine, so I was always interested in them and their singing.

I wish I could grant your request, but I feel so inadequate as a writer. I remember Frank Nedela's Band as far back as my memory goes. In fact I can recall five generations of Nedelas playing in Crete bands. Frank Nedela was the leader of the first Czech Band. His father also played in this band, and later on his son, Frank Jr., whose son Karl was — (and perhaps still is) a drummer in the Crete Band. Anyway, he and his wife play at dances. Karl's son Norris, who is now in the service, played in the Crete High School Band. Five generations!

Frank Nedela was a fine cornetist. He played with a military band while in the army in Austria. Rose Rosicky in her "History of Czechs in Nebraska" says Nedela's was the only band in the state, with the exception of Omaha's at one time; and this band played at the installation of Governor Butler. I don't remember that, but I do know they played at different places in the state at various times.

Another fine cornetist whom I have known all my life is Stephen Jelinek. He is still living in Lincoln. Stephen played with a military band during the Spanish-American War. According to Rose Rosicky he was band-leader first in Puerto Rico and later in the Philippines. I

just verified this last statement by phoning to his sister, Mrs. Frank Dredla. She also says that at that time (when he returned) he was considered the best cornetist in the state. He played in the Liberty Theater at Lincoln for many years after his return to Nebraska.

Both Stephen Jelinek and Mr. Nedela were asked to sound *Taps* at the burial of soldiers. Stephen still does, his sister says, and Mr. Nedela did as long as he lived.

Going back to Mr. Nedela, I recall how his band led the funeral procession of many a pioneer. Dr. Annadora Gregory, in her *Pioneer Days in Crete, Nebraska*, says that when the Crete Public School bell was being chosen Mr. Nedela with his violin accompanied the school board to the different bells in town. They tapped the bells and he got the tone for them on his violin. They decided that a bell "tuned to the tone of E flat" was different from the others.

Another Czech musician was J. C. Prochaska. He was a cornetist, pianist and violinist, band leader and orchestra director. He directed cantatas and composed them, and gave musical programs in private homes when people entertained.

Joseph Franta, still living, is a violinist. He directed orchestras and taught violin. My sister says that George Aller once had Franta play at a Teachers' Institute, and he said of him at the time, "He is about the best violinist in these parts."

If Lillian House can use any of this material, she is welcome to it.

Sincerely your friend,

AGNES AKSAMIT.

In a personal letter to the author from Dr. Howard Hanson, distinguished Nebraskan who was born at Wahoo, he wrote:

"I am interested to learn of the history of *Music of the Pioneer Days in Nebraska* which you are compiling, and I am very happy to send you my autographed photo for use in connection with the material for your book."

That photograph is reproduced herein. — *Editor*.