



## Music of the Pioneer Days in Nebraska

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Article Summary: This is the seventh and final article in a series describing town by town the musical life of the state after white pioneers began to settle 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: James Dye, John Fredricks, Mrs Charles Graham, John Swan, Mme Schumann-Heink, Helen May Martin, J Q A Smith, Howard Hanson, Daniel S Weemer, Daniel S Weimer, John H Bair, W C Elliott, J M Fodge, Grove O Joyner, Mrs R P Stanford, Mrs Euroia Wimer Bair, Jim Gatchell, Captain Gatchell, Frank L Manning, Frank E Taylor, Ewall Givens, Mrs C W Johnson, A B Wood, John Hall, Mrs Fred Enderly, Frank A Garlock, Mrs Nettie Garlock, the Bridge Brothers, T J Gahagan, Wellington Clark, Runey C Campbell, Frank M Shobar, R M Hanks, E M Cromer, Mary Slafter, Emma Shubert, Christian Madsen, George B Luft, E S Wood, Joseph Kingman, Harry Wisner, Louis Luft, Clarence Bonham, Edson Gering, J W Richardson, Claude Westervelt, William Schiffbauer, Albert C Stear, John A Burton, Dr J H Miller, Mrs Snow, John Conover, John Wiker, Inez McCorkle Dunning, Milton H Whaley, Mrs Isham Reavis, Mrs T J Gist, Mrs A J Weaver, Miss Maud Hart, Joseph Whitmore, Mr Miller of Oak Creek, Dan Weimer, Virginia Lamoureaux, Alice Nicholas Olson, Mrs Framer, Rev Mr Hill, David McGugin, Mrs L C Metcalf, Plin Metcalf, Perry Metcalf, Clarence Metcalf, Mrs Walter Metcalf, Myrtle Oxford, Mollie Oxford, Lilburn Oxford, Frank Doty, the Patch boys, Olaf Eduard Peterson, Lily Pons, Edward Grieg, Johann Svendsen, Jenny Lind, J H Harrison, Hazel Gertrude Kinscella, Wilbur Chenoweth, Dean Reed, Carl Hunt, William Larson, Jeanne Boyd, Cecil Berryman

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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 VII

### AUBURN AND BROWNVILLE

Music was introduced in the Brownville schools about 1876. James Dye was the first supervisor of music and the first violin teacher.

About 1878 "Pinafore" was given in Brownville. The same year there was a Glee Club in Auburn.

John Frericks owned the first piano in Auburn, and Mrs. Charles Graham was the first piano teacher.

John Swan conducted the first music store.

The first band in this locality was organized in Brownville.

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

Mme. Schumann-Heink, Innes' Band, Sousa's Band, and Thurlow Lieurance have all given concerts in Auburn.

Miss Helen May Martin of New York City, one of Nebraska's native musicians whose mother was born in Brownville, is a woman of whom Nebraska may justly be proud.

Miss Martin herself was born in Lincoln on December 18, 1893, in a three-story brick building on O Street facing the old capitol. She is the granddaughter of the late J. Q. A. Smith, formerly of Brownville, whose old stone farmhouse is still owned by the family and where Miss Martin and her mother plan to live some day.

At the age of seven Helen Martin began her study of the piano, although she was unable to see the keyboard or hear a note that was struck.



DR. HOWARD HANSON  
(Native of Wahoo, Nebraska)  
Director Eastman School of Music  
Rochester, New York

In 1923 she made her first public appearance in Olathe, Kansas. Later she received a scholarship and studied at the Conservatory of Music in Wichita. Besides the piano she plays the harp.

In the September 1928 issue of *The Etude*, an article entitled "The Most Amazing Achievement in the History of the Study of Music" was the story of Miss Martin's victory over her handicaps and of her interviews with such celebrities as Paderewski, Helen Keller, and others.

With her, as with the writer of this series, music means more than anything else in the world; and with the blind poet Milton she believes that "'tis not miserable to be blind;" that "eyesight lies not in eyes alone," and that "hard things can be borne and cheerfully if the heart be lowly wise."

#### ORTELO VALLEY AND MERNA

While this section of the state cannot compare with the earliest of Nebraska's history, as it was settled much later, early-day experiences were not vastly different. There were few settlers in the late seventies and early eighties, and Kilfoil Township, comprising 116 square miles, had but thirteen voters in 1880. Grand Island, Kearney and Plum Creek (now Lexington) were the nearest railway points.

Ortello Valley was fortunate in a musical way because several of the homesteaders had marked ability. The drouth of 1884 caused some to take up business life in other places, but music — and presenting musical entertainments — was the essence of living in the new country while the hardships of all pioneers were being endured.

Daniel S. Weemer, a former graduate and instructor from Westerville, Ohio, composed and published a book of Sunday-school music, "Royal Songs," and contributed to other collections of religious songs. He was the director of all musical efforts in this new little country neighborhood. A singing-school was the first organization under his supervision, and as the population increased, Ortello Valley gained a reputation thruout the north-western part of Custer County for the musical programs they were able to produce. Often even cantatas and operettas were

attempted. Lack of room or stage facilities did not interfere, for zeal and determination are traits of the pioneer spirit, and these entertainments were given either from the platform of a sod country schoolhouse or in the open air in summer.

A male quartette consisting of Daniel S. Weimer, John H. Bair, W. C. Elliott and J. M. Fodge, with Grove O. Joyner playing the accompaniments, sang together for many years.\* They won recognition during the political campaign of 1888. At an old-fashioned rally in Broken Bow they received a prize of \$25 for their music, which amount they donated to the campaign funds.

The small cottage organ — there were three in the valley at first — was loaded into a lumber wagon and taken wherever a musical event was to occur.

One recalls the joy and pleasure which these pioneers and their children derived from singing together as they met in the various homes or in the schoolhouse, their only public meeting place. Thus they fostered that love for music which was one of the heritages of the pioneer child.

Among Merna's early-day musicians was Mrs. R. P. Stanford, who possessed a soprano voice of fine quality and a trait of leadership. For many years she gave her time and talent most generously to every musical effort.

Mrs. Euroia Weimer Bair, as pianist and teacher, contributed much to the development of the young town and the community.

The first orchestra came into being about 1891 or 1892 with Jim Gatchell (young son of Captain Gatchell, an early editor) playing first violin; Grove O. Joyner, second violin; Frank L. Manning, clarinet; Frank E. Taylor, cornet; Ewall Givens, bass. Mr. Joyner owned the set of orchestral music books. This group played together for several years.

These singing groups and orchestras brought great pleasure and laid the foundation for a cultural development.

#### GERING

Gering, founded in 1887, was the oldest settlement and town in the Panhandle of Nebraska and so all the early musical events

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\* Mr. Fodge and Mr. Joyner were the brother and husband of the contributor of this installment.

took place around there. The first pretentious musical program in Scotts Bluff County was at Gering in 1890.

Mrs. C. W. Johnson, an accomplished musician, in charge of music at the Baptist Church at that time, presented the religious cantata "Bethlehem." Fifteen or twenty took part, and A. B. Wood, editor of *The Gering Courier*, took the part of King Herod—singing bass, as he said, for the first time in his life. John Hall, wrapped in long flowing robes, was one of the wise men. As he couldn't sing a note, Mrs. Johnson had him do his part in the recitative style. "The Shumway Girls," one of whom was Mrs. Fred Enderly, were two of the singers. Both had excellent voices. Mrs. Enderly in later years became a professional entertainer.

Mr. and Mrs. Frank A. Garlock opened a general store in Gering, the firm name of which was Franklin & Garlock. Mrs. Nettie Garlock was a fine instrumental musician. She had a sweet voice and was always willing to sing the old sentimental favorites of the day. She owned the only musical instrument (a small Mason & Hamlin organ) in the county at that time—1887.

Several years later the Bridge Brothers, accompanied by their wives, came to Gering and started a singing school. They did a great deal toward developing musical ability here and in the surrounding country.

Prof. T. J. Gahagan, who was a vocal, band and instrumental teacher, made a living selling organs and pianos.

Wellington Clark had a family orchestra that included a dulcimer. Runey C. Campbell, famed as an early cowboy, was the outstanding fiddler of that day.

The family of Frank M. Shobar, who first lived in Horseshoe Bend and later at Gering, constituted a dance orchestra.

A quartette which was a family organization, often singing in the early days in connection with Methodist activities, was composed of Mr. and Mrs. R. M. Hanks and Mr. and Mrs. E. M. Cromer. This quartette appeared on a float in an Oregon Trail Days parade as a highly appropriate reminder of pioneer days.

Mrs. Mary Slafter, wife of the First Christian Church minister in Gering, sang often. As she had had evangelistic experience, one of her most striking songs was "The Hand of God is Writing on the Wall."

Mrs. Emma Shubert of Gering owns a quaint little music box that has been in her family for seventy-five years. It was bought by her father, Christian Madsen, while on a sealing trip. She brought it from Sweden, and in spite of its age it still can be played.

The first appearance of a band in Gering was at the Fair in 1887. The instruments were borrowed from Kimball, and the leader was George B. Luft. Afterward, the players decided that with a capable leader available in the new town, a permanent organization would be advisable. Accordingly, several new men were enlisted who purchased their own instruments. E. S. Wood, a brother of A. B. Wood, editor of *The Gering Courier*, brought the snare drum they had used in Iowa in band work and also in a military band in Ottumwa. A. B. Wood bought a new Conn baritone valve trombone, which he played in many successive bands in Gering and under many different leaders.

Some of the early band members in Gering were Joseph Kingman, who played the clarinet and violin; Harry Wisner, editor of *The Star-Herald* in Scottsbluff; Louis Luft, later a band leader; Clarence Bonham, the photographer; Edson Gering, mail carrier; J. W. Richardson, pioneer homesteader; Claude Westervelt, William Schiffbauer, Albert C. Stear, John A. Burton, and Dr. J. H. Miller.

For over thirty years no band member drew a nickel for compensation. The leaders usually were paid something—in some cases, a fair salary.

#### SCOTTSBLUFF

From the beginning of this town, founded in 1900, music has held a central place. There were no singing schools or organized groups except in the churches.

When the recent depression caused music to be dropped in the schools of many Nebraska communities, Scottsbluff took advantage of the conditions, engaged the music supervisors who had lost their positions, and placed one in each school as a regular teacher. Thus, by organizing the grades into departmental form, Scottsbluff's public school music continues under trained supervisors.



## ALLIANCE

The first piano came to Alliance about 1893 and was owned by Mrs. Snow, who was Alliance's first piano teacher.

I am informed that the first musical event of any importance in the town was in 1896 when the Alliance Band made its appearance in the Republican Rally Parade. John Conover, who had organized the band in the previous year, was its director. Mr. Conover was an early cornet and violin teacher.

Mr. and Mrs. John Wiker opened the first music store in 1909.

Music was introduced into the Alliance schools about 1920, with Inez McCorkle Dunning as the first supervisor.

Milton H. Whaley composed a couple of marches which have been published.

Mme. Schumann-Heink is one of the musicians of renown who has visited the city.

## FALLS CITY

The first piano came into the community in 1860 and was owned by Mrs. Isham Reavis.

The first pipe organ was installed in 1893 in the Methodist Episcopal Church. Mrs. T. J. Gist, who contributed the information about Falls City's musical life, has been the organist in that church for thirty years.

Music was introduced in the schools of Falls City in 1906-1907, with Mrs. A. J. Weaver (*nec* Miss Maud Hart) as the first supervisor.

Joseph Whitmore, now deceased, conducted the first music store. The first musical organization was the Falls City Music Club, organized in 1915.

## MASON CITY

Mr. Miller of Oak Creek organized a band at Mason City in the spring of 1888.

Dan Weimer had a singing school here about 1894.

Mrs. Melville was an early piano teacher, and Miss Virginia Lamoureux was one of the first violin teachers.

Alice Nicholas Olson taught music in the schools about 1919. Mrs. Framer has a Hopp violin, made seventy-five years ago, and Rev. Mr. Hill has an organ-melodeon over seventy-five years old.

The Cat Creek Community south of Mason City had a bugle, fife and drum band which appeared at all early-day political rallies. It also had a male quartette which sang at all local programs and at the National Convention of the Populist Party at Omaha, in 1892, where they made quite a reputation.

#### DISTRICT No. 13

Sometime during the early winter of 1889 David McGugin organized a singing-school in the Oxford school-house, District No. 13. He also had a class the following winter. This was one of the first singing-schools in Custer County. Each pupil paid one dollar for twelve lessons and bought his own book. The name of the book used was "The Crescent for School and Convention," published in 1887-1888. Mr. McGugin led the singing in church and Sunday schools for over thirty-five years.

Following are the names of some of the pupils: Mrs. L. C. Metcalf and sons, Plin, Perry and Clarence; Mrs. Walter Metcalf; Myrtle, Mollie, and Lilburn Oxford; Frank Doty, and the Patch boys.

#### OMAHA

For sixty years Olaf Eduard Peterson, who brought the first saxophone to Omaha, taught music here. He died in 1940 at the age of seventy-eight. At one time he played his saxophone for King Oscar of Norway. His last public appearance was in October, 1938, when he played the flute obligato for Lily Pons at a concert in Omaha.

As a young man he was the first flutist in the Royal Theater Orchestra in Christiana (now Oslo), Norway. He has played under the direction of Edward Grieg, the composer, and Johann Svendsen, the violinist, conductor and composer.

He came to America when he was twenty-six years old, arriving in Omaha in 1879, and he played in the Boyd Theater orchestra until the theater went out of existence. He played in

various theater, hotel and symphonic orchestras and for many visiting celebrities, including Jenny Lind.

One instrument he brought from Norway — a saxophone — which was made by the inventor, Sax, himself. Peterson sold this instrument some years ago.

#### RAVENNA

Fifty years of singing in a church choir doesn't break any record, but it is worth noting.

For thirty years at Ravenna, and for twenty years before that at Grand Island and Cairo, J. H. Harrison of Ravenna has been a bass singer in Methodist Church choirs. His wife sang contralto for forty years.

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Nebraska has many native as well as adopted musicians besides those previously mentioned. Perhaps her most famous musical son is Howard Hanson, who was born in Wahoo in 1896 and is now director of the Eastman School of Music at Rochester, New York. Others are Hazel Gertrude Kinscella of Lincoln; Wilbur Chenoweth, also of Lincoln; Dean Reed and Carl Hunt, of Clay Center; William Larson of Rochester, New York; Jeanne Boyd, Cecil Berryman, and many others.

In pioneer days there was little thought of symphony orchestras but today Omaha has an excellent one, Lincoln has one; and there are such institutions as the University School of Music, the Wesleyan Conservatory, and Luther College. That this development could take place between one generation and the next is little short of a miracle. It means that Nebraska, having emerged from the pioneer period, is building a culture of her own.

#### CONCLUSION

It has been a great pleasure to trace the efforts of those dauntless pioneers who laid the musical foundations of Nebraska, and this work has been indeed a labor of love.

I regret that the present series is not more complete, but to delay in the hope of securing further information would have meant indefinite postponement. The delegates for Omaha were

unable to contribute reports, hence I am unable to set forth here the early musical history of that city.

In am especially indebted to those whose names appear below for the research that they have done.

I wish to express my gratitude also to Dr. A. E. Sheldon and Loraine Ferris of the Nebraska State Historical Society for the interest they have shown in this undertaking.

Reports for the several communities upon which this article is based were supplied as follows:

Alliance, Mrs. R. Landa; Alma, Miss Mayma Thompson; Anselmo and Milburn, Mrs. Alvin Daily and Mrs. Eugene Chrisman; Ansley, Mrs. Mary Foster; Arnold, Mrs. H. R. Hardin; Auburn, Mrs. H. H. McComas; Aurora, Mrs. W. C. Eloë; Beatrice, Mrs. B. D. Hotchkiss; Blair, Mrs. W. W. Wilkinson; Broken Bow, Mrs. Willis Cadwell; Callaway, Mrs. May T. Douglass; Columbus, Mrs. E. W. North; Crawford, Mrs. Georgianna Masters; Crete, Mrs. A. L. Johnson, Jr.; Custer County, Mrs. Eugene Chrisman; David City, Mrs. R. B. Sweeney; District No. 13, Myrtle Oxford Hersh; Exeter and Fairmont, Mrs. Herbert Howarth; Falls City, Mrs. T. J. Gist; Gering, Mrs. Eugene Chrisman; Gothenburg, Mrs. Dorothy McVicer; Grand Island, Evelyn B. Bevier; Hebron, Mrs. C. T. Wilson; Kearney, Mrs. H. J. Hull; Lee Park, Mrs. Ada Delano, Mrs. Carl Case and Hattie Speaks Marble; Lexington, Mrs. L. T. Smith; Lincoln, Mrs. J. H. Mitchell; Mason City, Mrs. Ray Duke; McCook, Mrs. H. S. Molzahn; Mullen, Mrs. J. E. Lowe; Nebraska City, Grace L. Ware; Neligh, Mrs. Fred Olmsted; Norfolk, Mrs. O. S. Spillman; North Platte, Mrs. Y. A. Hinman and Mrs. J. N. Baker, Jr.; Oconto, Mrs. Mabel Pierce; Osceola, Mrs. R. R. Cox; Peru, Miss Louise Mears; Plattsmouth, Mrs. E. H. Westcott and Miss Olive Gass; Polk, Mrs. H. D. Isaacson; St. Edward, Mrs. Gordon Matzen; Sargent, Mrs. Hazel Amos; Scottsbluff, Mrs. G. R. Hollman and Miss Leda McCain; Seward, Mrs. John Eberspacher; Superior, Mrs. R. B. Woermer; Sutton, Mrs. J. M. Weber; Weeping Water, Miss Esther Sheldon; Westerville, Mrs. Mary Foster; West Point, Mrs. G. L. Thompson; York, Mrs. C. R. Lainson and Mrs. R. E. Cutler.

And various newspapers.