

In 1915 a Centennial Program was given in the Old Methodist Church of which the local papers of the time give an account. The following letter is here reproduced because of the light it sheds upon the social life of the period.

REMINISCENCES OF THE EARLY BLENHEIM HILL WARBLERS

*Joel Warner
Hooper, Neb. May 4, 1915*

Prof. Thomas Peaslee Stamford, N.Y.

My Dear Friend and Youthful
Compatriot of Blenheim Hill:

You have pleased and flattered me by assigning to me the department of music in the centennial program of the "Old Brimstone Meeting House."

The early music of Blenheim Hill was vocal, and of a religious character. There was no musical instrument used of any kind to aid the voice and keep it up to concert pitch 60 or 70 years ago. The worshippers regarded it as a distraction. According to the old Methodist discipline, we were also forbidden "the singing of those songs which do not conduce to the glory of God." Hence the old Methodist hymn book without any printed music was almost exclusively our medium of song. However there were a few songs like, "Try, Try Again" "O, Come, Come Away" and "The Merry Swiss Boy" that we used to sing. In the Sander's Fourth Reader, old series, was a beautiful song,

There's not a tint that paints the rose
Or decks the lily fair
Or streaks the humble flower that grows
But God hath placed it there.

My father or Milo Wood generally "raised the tune" in public worship. Early my father gave some instruction in the old fa sol la buckwheat notes, which were simple and easy to learn. He had a strong bass voice that would balance quite a bunch of other singers. Milo Wood had a musical soprano or treble voice, as they called it then, and he was in popular demand at camp meetings and other religious gatherings. With the assistance of his wife they sang "Whither Goest Thou, Pilgrim Stranger," "The Mountain Calvary," "I'm on My Way to Canaan," "Oh How Charming Is the Radiant Band of Music," "The Lord into His Garden Came," "The Old Family Bible," "The Faithful Sentinel," "The Star of Bethlehem" and others I do not recall. The effect was about as good as a sermon, and better than some, for many sermons in those days were mere exhortations.

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Treble and bass were the principal parts that were sung in those days. But those old tunes were fragrant with the devotions of that generation. When they were cheerful they used to sing "Old Colchester," when they were meditative they sang "St. Edmunds," and "South Street," when they were struck with great tenderness, they sang "Woodstock" or "Consolation."

Were they wrapped in visions of the glory of the Church they sang "Zion;" were they overborne with love and glory of Christ, then the old Brimstone Meeting House rang with "Ariel" or "Coronation." And in those days there were certain tunes married to certain hymns as if God had joined them together and they were never put asunder.

"China," "North Salem,"—Hark from the tomb a doleful sound,— "Mear," and "Windham" were the staple tunes on funeral occasions. Those rich, minor strains sent a thrill through the audience and caused the mourners to sob and my flesh to creep.

Early in the '50s singing took a fresh impetus. A singing teacher by the name of Baird came into the neighborhood and taught two terms—26 weeks or six months of music, giving one night of instruction in each week. He was the first to introduce the round note system on Blenheim Hill. He began in the autumn of 1851 and closed in the spring of 1852. He introduced "The American Vocalist," a note book which contained the old tunes of former times. So you will not only commemorate the centennial of the Brimstone Meeting House, but the centennial and bi-centennial of that magnificent inheritance of church psalmody which has come down fragrant with the devotions of other generations, and no more worn out than when our great grandfathers went to glory singing them. Some of them we retain to this day.

I was 13 years old, and with several other boys we occupied the east half of the front seats of the old church with several of the lady alto singers. But every boy dropped out except Banks Mayhem and myself. Henry Mayhem began with the alto but his voice was changing and he was relegated to the tenor. He afterward taught music, but was suddenly taken away, to the sorrow of the community and confirming the saying that "The King of Shadows loves a shining Mark." My sister Chrissie, Lorena and Louise Mayhem were the other altos. Behind the altos were the sopranos which extended almost to the rear of the church. Among these were Susan and Amy Peaslee, Clarissa and Phebe Jane Wood and their father, Milo Wood, Mr. & Mrs. James Veley, Lydia, Maria, Jane and Delia Curtis, Charlotte Mayhem, Henry Cornell and his two daughters, Anna and Ellen. Julia Beach, John H. Warner and Elzina. The tenors occupied the front seats on the west. These were Horace Wood, Jacob Curtis, Willard and Orin Beach and others I cannot recall.

The bass were in the rear and consisted of my father, Thomas and Jay Mayhem, Orin Curtis, John Wood,

Henry Wood, James Van Dusen and others. This made a strong choir and music was in the air for six months. Mr. Baird began with the rudiments and carried us along to the anthems and heavier music. I well remember the first tune he introduced from the "American Vocalist" after a few evenings of blackboard exercises. It was entitled "Evening Prayer" set to the old tune of "Bounding Billows," the simplest piece in the book. Then we took "The Pearl that Wordlings Covet" and so on to the more difficult tunes.

Many families in the neighborhood were singing schools alone, carrying the four parts. How they increased the interest and attendance of the Sabbath service! Their voices uniting in praise and pouring them into the great tide of public worship.

The next winter, under the leadership of Rev. Win. C. Smith, a former Blenheim Hill boy, one of the greatest revivals of religion broke forth that the community ever experienced. A singing church is always a triumphant church. When the congregation is silent, or partially silent, it is like the silence of death.

Prof. Baird usually put in about two hours of work in an evening, with an intermission of 10 or 15 minutes. He used a violin and with this for an accompaniment he often closed the school with a song. He sang "The Friendless Widow" with pathos, and many of us learned it. I can sing it yet and have sung it many, many times. "We're all a Dodging" was another song which I learned.

Quartet singing was a special feature of the second term. The first time I heard "The Shining Shore" was by the first quartet called up to sing. One week's notice was given them to practice. How elated I felt when I was assigned a part in a quartet.

Singing rounds was a specially interesting feature of the closing part of each evening. "School Is Open," "Scotland's Burning," "The Bells for Fire Ring" etc. made soprano, bass, tenor, and alto vie with each other in sustaining their part.

Before the professor left he appointed John H. Warner leader of the choir, Thomas Mayhem leader of the bass, Horace Wood leader of the tenor, and Lorena Mayhem leader of the alto.

As long as brother John was at home he kept up the choir practice. He had a good tenor voice and became quite proficient in helping all the parts. He composed a few tunes which were never published.

After he left home Thomas Mayhem kept the singers together. Nothing ever kept me from choir practice if I could possibly be there. I knew all the parts of many of them from memory.

Soon after the old church was torn down and the new one erected about 1856, Prof. Morse came into the neighborhood and instituted a singing class. He was a capable and efficient teacher, but the enthusiasm was not so great as under Prof. Baird. Instead of using a blackboard, he had the rudiments of

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music printed on large scrolls, which was quite a saving of time and labor. A group of the younger people entered his class. Thomas Peaslee and Bettie, Joseph Perry Champlin and Jane Jesse, Libbie and Harvey Warner. The Effner girls, Helen Wood, and Mary Jane Baker were among the new reinforcements. We still used the "American Vocalist" during his first term, but Prof. Morse selected the more modern style of music. He held musical conventions, and several schools from Gilboa, Conesville, Jefferson, and Blenheim would come to Blenheim Hill for a two-days musicale, or Sangerfest as the Germans call it. Then we, in turn, would go in a body to these other schools and have free entertainment the same as was given at the quarterly meetings. One time a sleigh load of us went as far as Conesville, which must be close to the Greene County line, and we had poor sledding on our return home. I once attended a musical institute at Middleburgh, under the management of Prof. Morse and Prof. See of New York. It lasted from Monday until Friday evening. We used the "Song Crown" and the "Key Note." The "Festival Glee Book" was later introduced on Blenheim Hill. In the practice of glees, we got rid of that labored movement which the singing of sacred songs alone often causes.

In the winter of 1857 another singing teacher, whose name you may supply, conducted a term of musical instruction on Blenheim Hill. I was teaching in Strykersville that winter and attended but one or two evenings. He was enthusiastic in his work but was not considered on a par with Prof. Morse.

Joseph Perry Champlin led the choir after this for a while.

Perhaps no local leader rendered better service to the singers of Blenheim Hill in those days than Orin B. Curtis. He was exact and thorough and would not dismiss a piece of music until it had been well executed.

Then many of us went to the war and Harvey J. Warner conducted the music during the interim. After this I was at home but very little, but in August 1865 I attended a singing rehearsal with Harvey Warner in charge. After the intermission he turned the leadership over to me.

After a stay of a week or so, I bade farewell to New York State, and in the last week of August 1865 I landed in Nebraska and did not return home for seven years. What has happened in the last 50 years others must relate. I learned through correspondence that Thomas Peaslee was taking a thorough course in music. Upon my return home, I learned that he had graduated and had given a term of instruction on Blenheim Hill, among his other appointments. My father and many others were very enthusiastic in their praise of his work. No man of all the past teachers had such tact and skill in getting the bashful and indifferent singers to come out before the audience and do their best. I had the pleasure of meeting him and was charmed with his voice. My people had moved to Gilboa, and we spent one evening together with my folks in the dear delights of song.

This is a rapid review of the musical history of Blenheim Hill up to 1865. There are many amusing and interesting incidents connected with this review that I have omitted for fear it would become too lengthy. If

you want more, say so. Especially I could provide a paper on the songs of the war which your singers might make entertaining by putting them in force as each song is mentioned.

Respectfully submitted,

Joel Warner.

From a pamphlet in the library of Catherine Kaufmann Harwood White: Family History: Descendants of Japhet Wood, Soldier of the American Revolution Who Settled in Blenheim Patent, Schoharie County, New York State in 1814 by W. C. Ruland, C.E., Cobleskill, N. Y. 1951.

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