

MUSIC ON THE INDIAN TERRITORY FRONTIER

By Kathleen Garrett

The three small daughters of Mack and Florence Edmondson hurried into their freshly washed and ironed long-sleeved print aprons, laced quickly their high-topped shoes, and stood quiet as mice while their mother brushed and braided their long brown hair.

This was a special day in the week; it was the day their music teacher drove out seven miles in a buggy from the small town which served as postal, buying, and selling center for the community to give the whole family music lessons.

It was a big day for the pupils and perhaps it was also for the teacher. The place was the Cherokee Nation in the Indian Territory, and the time was the 1880's. The circumstances were a triumph over unbelievable odds. Forty short years before into an almost unpopulated, unsettled area of what is now the state of Oklahoma had come twelve thousand Cherokee Indians from their former home in the southeastern United States (four thousand of them had died on the way). Those forty years had seen tribal dissension resulting in murder, illnesses like malaria and typhoid, hard toil in clearing lands for farms and in building houses, barns, and fences, and civil war with its poverty, orphans, and ill-feeling. But they also had seen a tribal government established with its constitution and its courts. They had seen a national newspaper founded and a public school system and two seminaries for higher learning.

The advent of the music teacher symbolized a personal triumph, too. It meant that Mack and Florence Edmondson, living in a place far from a city, far from railroads, in a country not yet a part of the United States, a place often mistakenly thought of as the home of wild Indians and wilder outlaws, had overcome many obstacles to bring what culture was available to their little girls.

The organ had been bought by selling a cow. And later on when the little girls had attended the Cherokee Female Seminary, they had learned to play on the fashionable piano. Back home again on vacations, they turned up their noses at the organ on which they had first learned to play and which had served them faithfully. They complained that they couldn't play on "that old organ," so the organ was turned in on a piano.

Music lesson day was an event for the little girls, for it broke the monotony of a life with few visitors, put them in touch with the outside world, and gave them something to do. One of the little girls had found that if she went to practise immediately after a meal,

her mother never made her do the dishes, and pleas of "Ma, make Cherric come help us," by the other two fell on deaf ears.

It was probably an event, too, for their teacher—a Mrs. Summerfeldt (or something like this name, for seventy years may not have kept true the original spelling). She was probably very much pleased to find somebody in the so-called wilderness to appreciate her talents. She was the wife of a carpenter, and where she studied and from whom are lost with many another pioneer fact.

Once a week she and her baby made the seven mile drive. Sometimes she would come early in the morning and spend the day; at other times she would come in the evening and spend the night. Sometimes she was paid in money; more often by her own request she was paid in products from the farm, and the buggy would start on its homeward journey laden with sausage, or lard, or butter, or eggs, or potatoes, or green beans, or apples, or peaches, according to season. A part of her pay must have been the admiration she drew from her pupils, for after the lessons or sometimes during them, she would give a concert.

These were the days before the six months' visit to the dentist; they were the days when a dentist in a pioneer community was almost a phenomenon, and Mrs. Summerfeldt had but one front tooth. But teeth or no teeth she would seat herself at the organ, take her baby, Selma Florence, on her knee, and then "Bonaparte's Retreat from Moscow," "Brown's Jubilee March," "Listen to the Mocking Bird" would ring out in the farmhouse parlor, and send thrills up and down the spines of her audience. Or she would play and sing "The Old Tramp"—a Victorian tear jerker—and the most pleasurable sense of sorrow filled her listeners and made bright their eyes in sympathy.

Mrs. Summerfeldt at the organ was impressive and may have served as a stimulus, for years later two of the little girls studied music in Boston, the third in Chicago.

Mrs. Summerfeldt must have been one of the first "career women," and even motherhood did not cramp her style. For Selma Florence's necessary sustenance periods never interrupted the counting and the footpatting nor caused the music pupils to miss a note.

The statement that the whole family took lessons is not strictly accurate and must be qualified with an exception—Mack, the father. If the term "young blade" can be applied to pioneer youth, he was one. His accouterments and constant companions were his gun, his boots, his hat and his pipe. When as a teen-ager it was time to obtain some advanced education, he decided that he knew more than the teachers. But on marriage he settled down to provide his wife and family with the best living the country afforded, a well equipped and productive farm with, eventually, a two-story house with five

bedrooms (no less), a parlor, a dining room, a kitchen, and numerous pantries.

To have suggested that he take music lessons or even to take off his hat, take his pipe out of his mouth, and sit down in the parlor to listen to music was an insult to his pioneer manhood. And Mrs. Summerfeldt and her peculiarities came in for some misery. But Summerfeldt on the days she came it was strange how much work had to be done around the house. And when Mrs. Summerfeldt played, he was always to be found still with his hat on and with his pipe, standing outside the parlor door or window. And invariably he would call in and request some favorite tune.

The mother, Florence, however, took lessons along with the little girls; and her granddaughter remembers her as an old lady still taking piano lessons.

At the ages of twelve and ten the two older daughters packed their new clothes in the wonderful barrel-topped trunk, and drove with their parents fifty miles to the Cherokee National Female Seminary. The Seminary provided an excellent general education for its Cherokee girl students—a curriculum planned by the heads of Mount Holyoke Seminary, South Hadley, Massachusetts, and carried out by its alumnae.¹

Singing was a part of the original curriculum initiated on the opening of the Seminary in 1851. Ellen Whitmore, its founder and first principal, writing in her journal on May 11, 1851, records that she has the classes in history, grammar, arithmetic, and reading, that Sarah has the writing, botany, one class in grammar, one in arithmetic, and singing.² Sarah Worcester may have had some training in music in the three and a half years that she was a student at Mount Holyoke Seminary, yet as a daughter of missionary parents, singing and playing an instrument were as natural to her as attending church.

The missionary, who ventured into the "foreign field" in the Nineteenth Century, as indeed he who ventures today, must of necessity have abilities and skills above and beyond those of his immediate profession. Samuel Austin Worcester, venturing missionary into the Cherokee country in 1825, took with him as "additional equipment" talents ranging from "printing a book to curing a beef." And one of course was the ability to "sing and to teach others to sing."³

¹ See Alice Bam, *A Cherokee Daughter of Mount Holyoke*, (Muscatine, Iowa, 1927) and Fola Garrett Bowers and Kathleen Garrett, eds., *The Journal of Ellen Whitmore*, (Tahlequah, Oklahoma, 1953).

² Bowers, op. cit., p. 20.

³ Alice Bam, *Cherokee Messenger*, (Norman, Oklahoma, 1925), p. 17.

Music seems to be a valuable concomitant to any religious enterprise, and Worcester soon found that the music-loving Cherokees responded rewardingly. Hymns in their own language he composed for them and printed in the *Cherokee Hymn Book*, which went through at least a seventh edition (1845). But words were not enough, for he wished to give the Cherokees a singing-book, one from which they could learn to read the notes. At length after much discouragement and difficulty, the *Cherokee Singing Book* was an actuality.⁴ Samuel Worcester's words and music, for he wrote both, have cheered and comforted Cherokees for many a year.⁵

Not only for purposes of church and the Christianizing of the heathen but for their own pleasure was music made a part of the Worcester family life. By 1844, there were enough members of the Methodist Church among the Indian tribes to organize an Indian Mission Conference.⁶ The Reverend William H. Goode, superintendent of Fort Coffee Academy in the Choctaw Nation, on his way to the first session, visited the Worcesters and wrote of the visit, "Deprived of society, they relied upon and developed other resources of entertainment. Music, vocal and instrumental, was cultivated

.....⁷
 Instruments were shipped from the East for the Worcester children. John Orr Worcester, the second son, evidenced musical talent and a tenor viol was sent from Boston for his and his brother's use. Another instrument to come from Boston was a seraphine. Sarah writing in 1847 says that her father was putting up the instrument and that they all had been trying to play it.⁸ So Sarah Worcester, when the time came to begin her career as a teacher, took the singing at the Cherokee Female Seminary.

The early Cherokee education law which required that vocal music be one of the teaching subjects of one of the Seminary teachers was adhered to throughout the existence of the Seminary. Vocal music was always a part of the Seminary activities, and records exist of the Seminary girls singing at concerts to raise money for charitable causes, singing at Commencement, singing at the exercises for Examination Day.⁹ They helped to swell the church choirs; they contributed whenever "a musical number" was needed. Pieces learned at the Seminary were repeated with much satisfaction to the home folk when the girls performed at local concerts during vacation.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 307 ff.

⁵ Carolyn Thomas Fermon, *Park Hill*, (Muskegon, Oklahoma, 1948), p. 97.

⁶ Walter Adair Thompson, *The Story of Tobacco Methodism*, (unpublished manuscript).

⁷ Foreman, *op. cit.*, p. 54 (cf. Henry C. Benson, *Life Among the Choctaws* [Charlottesville, 1861]).

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 134; See, *Cherokee Messenger*, p. 328.

Piano music was important too, the situation being characterized by an alumna as "nearly every Seminary girl could play." Of the writer's eight relatives who attended the Female Seminary seven could play the piano passably and two uncommonly well. So keen was the desire for music lessons that in time the one part-time singing teacher mentioned by Miss Whitmore gave way to a staff of three who devoted all their time to music.

Perhaps the most flourishing period of the Seminary was that under the principalship of Miss A. Florence Wilson, which began in 1875 and ended in 1901. Conduct was dignified, if somewhat stern, scholarship was high and the arts, if limited in scope, were encouraged within the facilities provided. Miss Wilson herself was not a performer; "She couldn't carry a tune, nor did she know one note from another." But she was passionately fond of music and would listen for hours while a niece played the piano for her. She saw to it that every Seminary girl had a part in some performance.¹⁶ And her pride in the girls who played and sang was evidenced by the smile of pleasure on her face while they were performing—and Miss Wilson could and did frown when she was displeased!

A story from which Miss Wilson derived much pleasure in telling concerned music in the Indian Territory in an earlier period than her own. Fort Gibson, established in 1824 and re-established on higher ground and in stone buildings in the middle 1840's, was the center not only of military life in the Cherokee Nation, but of social life. Wives and daughters of the officers not only visited the fort, but some lived at the fort itself. One evening at a gathering piano music was in progress. An Indian, dressed in native clothes, his blanket about his shoulders, came into the room quietly. He sat down in the back of the room and listened to the music. No one spoke to him. Finally one vivacious young girl who had just finished playing and had been applauded jumped up from the piano stool, turned to the Indian and said with a laugh, "Maybe you'd like to play for us." He rose, bowed, and replied, "If you'd care to hear me." He laid aside his blanket, and for over an hour played classical music. His audience was amazed and silent for a few minutes; then the applause came. The Indian had graduated from an eastern school and had studied music there.¹⁷

Miss Wilson no doubt knew the identity of the man, but the narrator of her tale remembers only that he was a Ross. The Ross family and other Cherokee families sent sons and daughters to schools in the East in the days before the Cherokees had established schools of higher education and even afterward for additional degrees.

¹⁶ Lola Garrett Bowers and Kathleen Garrett, *A. Florence Wilson, Friend and Teacher*. (Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1951), p. 23.

¹⁷ Letter from Mrs. W. E. Hearson (Dora Wilson), niece of Miss Wilson, to Lola G. Bowers.



1925-26 Mack Edmondson family, 1925/26

The Mack Edmondson Family, left to right: Cora, Mack, Cherrin, Florence, Duane.

During this golden age of the Seminary, the list of music teachers is fairly long. It is to the credit of the Cherokees that these teachers were both Cherokee and white; merit, one likes to think, was the determining factor in the choice of teacher.

It has seemed to be a commonplace of Cherokee history that those white people who went among the Cherokees learned to love them and came to identify themselves with them and showed themselves Cherokee in spirit in a remarkable way. Missionaries, in spite of hardships, spent long lives among them. Army personnel sent to corral and remove the Cherokees became in many cases kind and sympathetic beyond the call of duty. Likewise Miss Fannie Cummins, teacher of music at the Female Seminary, must have fallen under the Cherokee spell. For after she had left the Seminary and when teaching in Kansas, to one of her "dear little girls," she writes, "So you still like me better than any of your teachers. I am glad to hear it. I do not think I will ever meet any girls I will love as dearly as I do the little girls who belonged to me at the Sem."¹²

Miss Fannie Cummins left "an awfully nice impression" on her pupils. The source of this impression is somewhat hard to pin point after sixty years, but it seems to lie in her friendliness and her interest in her pupils.

Miss Nell Taylor, of Neosho, Missouri, who came to the Indian Territory to teach music and remained to become Mrs. Cln Galager, was another favorite teacher. "Miss Nell's" charm, poise, dignity won her much admiration and affection.

Miss Florence Caleb and her mother came into the Indian Territory when "Florrie" was a small child. She was educated in Cherokee schools (probably the only white girl to be so) and later became a teacher of piano and voice at the Seminary. She is remembered by her pupils and all who knew her as an admirable person.¹³

A Cherokee who taught music at the Seminary was Miss Carlotta Archer, one of three charming and talented sisters. As teachers and public-spirited women their influence on Cherokee boys and girls was marked. Miss Archer must have done her work well, for after sixty years at least one pupil is still playing pieces that Miss Archer taught her. (This particular portion of this piece of writing is being done while the writer's mother in an adjoining room is doing just that!)

Mrs. Marlin R. Chauncey (Vera Jones), a niece of Miss Archer, has a charming memory of her aunt. As a small child she and her

¹² Letter to Genia Edmondson, now Mrs. Timin, dated December 6, 1904.

¹³ For further information see Kathleen Garrett, *The Cherokee Orphan Asylum*, Bulletin of the Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College, Vol. 50, No. 21, August, 1953, p. 16.

family would visit in summer the farm home where Miss Archer was spending her vacation. In the late evening they would sit on the porch in the cool; Miss Archer would be at the piano in the darkened parlor and would play for them hour after hour. Miss Archer would probably be pleased to know that her piano is treasured today in the Chauncey home in Stillwater.

Other native daughters who were on the music staff of the Seminary were Miss Cora McNair, Miss Blaise Adair, and Miss Cherrie Adair, women of excellent qualities and held in high esteem.

The music learned and played by these Cherokee girls was typical of that learned and played by the Victorian young lady. It was the day of thrilling runs and powerful chords—the more runs the more thrilling, the more chords the more powerful. The term "de concert" figures largely in the titles of the music of that period. Polkas de concert, galops de concert, marches de concert, valse de concert, morceaux de concert gave the young ladies ample opportunity to show their skill.

Duets, trios, and quartets were immensely popular, especially at the Seminary and other schools. Mrs. R. B. Garrett, who as Miss Cherrie Edmondson taught music for five years at the Cherokee Orphan Asylum, was especially grateful for these combinations. "They gave more children a chance to participate." The boys and girls who attended the Asylum had "music in their souls." The children were always "picking out little tunes." And in addition to special performers at all Asylum affairs, there was a large choir. Some of the duets played by the Orphan Asylum children escaped the totally destructive fire which leveled the Asylum building and brought an end to the institution. A copy of a "Maypole Dance" with a manuscript notation "Played by Nau and Miss Cherrie, May 11, 1899" indicates that the Cherokee Nation tried to give its young charges what musical advantages it could.

Other music that has survived for an even longer period is that of Amanda M. Ross which she studied when she was in school in the East. Amanda very assiduously recorded the dates on which she took the various pieces. In March 1844, for instance, she was studying a piece grandly entitled "Beethoven's Dream," Grand Waltz, Especially Composed for the Pianoforte. Her music beautifully bound in leather, her name in gold on the cover, is now in the Murrell Home, Tahlequah, reposing on the music rack of Mary Jane Ross's piano.

Among the cargo freighted into the Indian Territory were pianos, music boxes, guitars, and mandolins. By boat, by ox-cart, from Kansas or Virginia or what other place of origin, they came into the Territory to be cherished and preserved. Sometimes they were to be gifts for a Seminary graduate or a bride; sometimes they

came as household goods with a migrating family or an army family. But the plodding oxen or mules or horses were bringing culture and refinement into a land wanting it and ready for it.

The charming small piano now properly housed in the Murrell Home came into the Cherokee Nation from Kansas. In 1849 Lieutenant Colonel and Brevet Brigadier General William G. Belknap was sent to command the garrison at Fort Gibson; his piano made the journey from Fort Leavenworth by ox-cart.

When in 1851 he was ordered away, Mrs. William P. Ross "wanted that piano more than anything in the world." Mrs. Ross as Mary Jane or Mollie was the daughter of Lewis Ross, a niece of Chief John Ross, and cousin as well as wife to William Potter Ross. She was charming and accomplished, having been East for her education. She played and sang, and it is little wonder that her desire affixed itself to General Belknap's piano. She took her son's head-right money and bought the piano. It remained in her home in Fort Gibson until she died, becoming then the property of her son Hubbard and later of his eldest daughter, Marjorie (Mrs. Upton), who has lent it to the Murrell Home.¹⁴

This piano, spinet-like in appearance and having only six notes instead of the usual eight, was made by John Pethick of New York and fosters speculation as to what became of the Chickering on which Mary Jane played for Ethan Allen Hitchcock when during 1842 he visited Lewis Ross and his family in their Park Hill home.¹⁵ Sometime after that date Lewis Ross established a home at Grand Saline and the piano probably moved with the family. Mary Jane may have been reluctant to remove the piano from the family home on her marriage in 1846, and it may have been destroyed during the Civil War, when according to some accounts Lewis Ross's Grand Saline house was "completely gutted."

Another piano that made its way into the Indian Territory was that of Mrs. Narcissus Owen, wife of Colonel Robert Latham Owen of Lynchburg, Virginia, mother of Senator Robert L. Owen, long-time senator from Oklahoma. Its history—its being given to Mrs. Owen as a wedding gift by her husband, its use after his death for giving lessons in the home, its removal to Park Hill when she came to teach music at the Female Seminary, its escape from the fire which destroyed the Seminary in 1887, and its subsequent transfer as gift from one member of the family to another—is told on the display card lying on the piano itself in the Cherokee Museum, John Vaughan Library, Northeastern State College, Tahlequah. Looking at its massive proportions, its four huge heavily carved legs, the scroll work

¹⁴ Information very kindly supplied by Mrs. Jessie Ross Cobb and Mrs. Anne Ross Peburn of the Murrell Home.

¹⁵ Grant Foreman, ed., *A Traveler in Indian Territory*. (Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 1930), p. 45.

carving of its music rack (wherein is the name Stieff), one wonders that it escaped the vicissitudes of fortune to which it has been subjected.

Organs, it would not be too far from the truth to say, were plentiful in the Indian Territory, not only the small portable organ, so necessary to religious services, but the large parlor organ with elaborate overboard containing mirror and alcoves for family portraits, vases, and oil lamps. The traveling organ salesmen were a persuasive group or the desire for instruments was great, for at least on *Beattie's Prairie*, Cherokee Nation, in the 1880's scarcely a family with any pretensions to the good life but had its organ. Nor were these families only those of mixed white and Indian blood; the full blood families had their instruments too. "Aunt" Betsy Gooden's organ graced one whole wall of her two-roomed plus lean-to log cabin on *Taylor's Prairie*; and the full blood, living on *Spavinsaw*, who could not get the piano he had purchased into his house because of the smallness of the door provided a brush arbor to shelter it.

These purchases were not necessarily vanity purchases, for if the owners did not know the musical notes, they were often very good at playing by ear. The sight of "Aunt" Betsy Gooden, all two hundred pounds of her, barefooted, in a calico dress, picking out chords on the organ and accompanying herself while she sang hymns must indeed have been a sight to see.

Native talent best expressed itself perhaps in the playing by ear of the fiddle. Expert fiddle playing ran in families; the *Duncan* family of "*Rose Prairie*" (properly *Rowe's Prairie*)—father (John E. "Red Cloud") and sons—gave much pleasure with their fiddlin'. The *Adair* family—uncle (Benjamin Franklin) and nephews (Rollin and Bob)—may have had violin lessons, but natural or acquired, they "had their fun playing."¹⁶ Serenading of the Female Seminary girls by the boys of the Male Seminary was sometimes done by fiddling as well as by the traditional singing, much to the delight of the girls who rewarded the serenaders by throwing down bouquets of flowers from their windows.¹⁷

Mandolins and guitars were favorite instruments too, as gifts at Christmas or brought home in saddle bags along with sets of *Dickens* and *Scott* from the trading center if father had had a good day selling or trading his livestock or grain. The boys of the Male Seminary could in fact take lessons on the mandolin. E. Goldman, a white man living in *Tahlequah*, taught mandolin for many years to the Seminary boys. Today Mr. Goldman in his eighties attends the Cherokee reunions with great regularity and much interest.

¹⁶ Information from Mrs. *Cherrie Adair Moore*, daughter of Benjamin Franklin Adair.

¹⁷ *Bowers, A. Florence Wison*, p. 26.

Tribal music had little if any place among the Cherokee of the Cherokee Nation West (1839-1907), but the Cherokee love of music was not without expression. The church with its hymns in Cherokee and in English meant much to these people. It was not always possible to have a minister, not even a visiting minister, so word would travel from farmhouse to farmhouse that there was to be a "singing." Sometimes it was held at night, sometimes on Sunday afternoon; sometimes it was held in a home, sometimes at the schoolhouse. If it was held in a home or in a national schoolhouse, there would be an instrument, but if it was held in one of the "private" schools (established by two or three families hiring a teacher and providing some kind of accommodations) then the singing would be unaccompanied, set off to a good start by a tuning fork. Baptizings, too, were a source of expression. Beautiful music was produced by the natural, untrained voices of those gathering for the sacrament of baptism.

The schools both the public school and the seminaries offered chances of study, if to a limited degree, and encouraged participation, and the performer was always welcomed and respected. Music in the Indian Territory¹⁶ in the last half of the Nineteenth Century was not great music; it may not always have been good music, but it was greatly enjoyed and deeply appreciated.

¹⁶The general title on the subject of music in the Indian Territory, presented Miss Garrett's interesting story of music in the Cherokee Nation, could well cover many such stories on the subject in other nations and tribes of the Territory: Indian composers of hymns over 120 years ago, the original words in the Indian language published in the first hymnals here; individual, sweet voiced singers, some nationally known; the Choctaw school for small boys, Norwalk (1844) noted for its voice training and class singing; the beautiful panna from France in the Rose Hill home of the Choctaw planter, Col. Robert M. Jones (1840's); the melodian that was a treasured part of the first household furnishing of Allen Wright and his bride, Harriet Mitchell Wright (1857); the choruses and quartets from Wheelock Mission beginning 1832, and Goodland Mission beginning 1850; and one of the first if not the first, published musical compositions from the Territory, "New Hope Waltz," 1887, dedicated to the "Young Ladies of New Hope," a seminary (established 1842) near old Skullville (later post office, Oak Lodge), Choctaw Nation.—Ed.



[Courtesy Cherokee Museum, Spitalmehrfeld State Archival, Münsterquai]

The "Music Club" at the Cherokee Female Seminary, 1896. Left, Miss Nell Taylor; right, Miss Carlotta Archer; back row, Miss Dora Wilson; foreground, Miss Pearl Drew. Gentlemen in the photograph, left to right; front row, "Uncle" Joe Cashon, Dr. Ed Blake, Mr. West; back row, W. W. Hastings and Bob Rutherford.

Composed and respectfully dedicated to the Young Ladies of New Hope Female Seminary,
Oak Lodge, Indian Ter.

NEW HOPE WALTZ.

FOR PIANO OR CABINET ORGAN.

By ALICE W. JOSEPHSON.

The image displays the first page of a musical score for the 'New Hope Waltz'. It consists of five systems of music, each with a treble and bass staff. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings. The first system begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The second system includes a 'Pizz.' marking above the treble staff. The third system includes a 'Fz' marking above the treble staff. The fourth system includes a 'Pizz.' marking above the treble staff. The fifth system includes a 'Pizz.' marking above the treble staff. The score is arranged in a standard piano or cabinet organ format.

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First page of the "New Hope Waltz" published in 1889, composed at New Hope Seminary and dedicated to the students of this noted school for Choctaw girls, near Skutumpah.