

The Origin of Minstrelsy

The Sun is able to present an authoritative account of the origin of negro minstrelsy from the hitherto unpublished diary of Charley White, one of its pioneers, whose praises have been sung recently by correspondents of this paper with memories that go back to the days of the old melodion on the Bowery, where the black-faced comedians sang: "Possum up the gum tree, Cooney in the hollow, Show me the man who stole My half a dollar, Pi, yi, yi! Hoop up de doodledum, etc."

White died in 1891, leaving his diary, a thick volume written in script as plain as print, with newspaper clippings, programs and pictures inserted, to his brother-in-law, Theodore F. Giese of Whitestone, L. I. It is doubtful whether the details of the early history of negro minstrelsy have been preserved by any other man, and there was probably no one else of that day whose opportunities for gathering them, even if he had the inclination to write a history of negro minstrelsy, were equal to Charley White's. His Boswell-like attention to details gives his diary historical interest.

White's own life, as written by himself in this diary, shows the sort of stuff of which the negro minstrel of fifty years ago was made. He was born in Broad street, Newark, in 1821. "His father," to quote him, "was an extensive boot and shoe manufacturer in those early days but through the failure of two southern firms with whom he largely dealt, he became greatly embarrassed and soon after with his family of seven children moved to New York city."

"Charley was at this time only two years old. His parents passed through a series of hardships for a time, until the children grew up a little, and by their industry the labors of the old people began to lessen."

"Charley while a boy followed many different pursuits without regard to prospective results. Along about the year 1837 he became infatuated with the exquisite music of the French accordion, which was then quite new and a very good instrument in those days, and with his careful earnings he soon saved money enough to buy one and satisfy his ambition. He was not long in becoming a master of the instrument."

"Charley White's first performance in a professional way was for the Washington Total Abstinence Society at 71 Division street, New York, Nov. 23, 1842. His second appearance was soon after, at Croton hall, corner of Bowery and Division streets, for Joe Murphy's concert. He joined the Kentucky Minstrels, Vauxhall Garden, in 1843."

"They consisted of Billy Whitlock, T. G. Booth, Barney Williams and Charley White. Mr. White afterward became connected with the following organizations: New York Minstrels, at Paterson Music Hall, Feb. 10, 1844; Clay Minstrels, at Columbia hall, Grand street, New York, March 15, 1844; Virginia Minstrels, at Bunker Hill Assembly Rooms, Philadelphia, June 17, 1844; Original Virginia Serenaders, at the Chatham Theatre, New York, July, 1844; Ethiopian Minstrels, at Palmer's Opera House, Chambers street, New York. During the next year White's diary shows that he performed with these other organizations: Sable Sisters, African Serenaders, Kentucky Minstrels, Ethiopian Operatic Brothers, the Buffalo Troupe of Ethiopian Singers, and several lesser organizations. Evidently the make-up of these companies changed rapidly."

White's success prompted him to open Charley White's Melodion, opposite the Old Bowery Theatre, on Nov. 24, 1846, and here he made a more valuable reputation than he could in travelling companies. It was named after the Melodion in Boston. White writes of it, always referring to himself in the third person:

"The prices of admission were 12 cents to the parquet and 6 cents to the gallery. When the place was ready to open White played an engagement of thirteen weeks under the proprietorship of W. B. Hatch."

"In the course of the season the following performers appeared: Mons Adriant, William Carter, Frank Gallagher, Bill Price, Luke West, Frank Stanton, Dave Reed, Malvin Turner, Bobby Williams, Pete Morris, Chas. Fisher, Clem Titus, Mrs. Oldfield, Billy Coleman, John H. Murray, Signor Francesco, Jimmy Reynolds, W. T. Peterschen and J. T. Huntley."

"On May 20, 1849, the building was destroyed by fire, and through the friendship of Mr. Bill Swift the property on which the building stood was purchased and a new five-story

building was erected on the site, in which Mr. White leased a theater for some years. * * * The prices of admission to the new place were raised to 12 and 25 cents."

There have been very few better artists than those who made their mark in cork and otherwise in this popular resort. They consisted of the following: George White, Edwin Deaves, Phil J. Rice, H. Rainforth, I. Carroll, Pete Lane, Jim Budworth, Dave Price, Dave Wambold, Dan Bryant, Tony Pastor, Ben Yates, William Withers, Charley Fox, T. D. Rice, Lew Donnelly and a score of others.

"There are many gentlemen today," writes Mr. White, "now surrounded with their families, who will remember with pride the old pleasant hours passed in this old minstrel resort of their boyhood days. * * * Shortly after, Mr. White leased the premises 17 and 19 Bowery from the Beckman brothers, on which site he built his theatre called White's Varieties, and opened the same Sept. 13, 1852, with an excellent company."

White's diary tells of the writer's experiences in various houses of amusement on the Bowery, sometimes as his own manager and again as a member of a musical company.

On Feb. 22, 1857, he started the Bryant minstrels in business in Mechanic Hall at 472 Bowery. He wrote songs, negro sketches and joke books that were standards in minstrelsy, and many of the names running through his diary of men who blacked their faces have since become well known in the legitimate drama. It was an active life that he led. He owned several hotels at various times, saloons, a meat market, opera houses and negro minstrel companies. From 1852 until 1890 he traveled with Bartley Campbell's "White Slave" company, and he had played one week with Edward Harrigan in "Reilly and the 400," when he died on Jan. 4, 1891.

Mr. White devoted many pages of his diary to a history of negro minstrelsy and a catalogue of the companies and a list of names of the men famous in it. Under the heading "Negro Minstrelsy: Its Starting Place, Origin and Progress; Minstrel Bands as They Organized," he wrote:

"Many individuals blackened their faces professionally a long time prior to the organization of this style of amusement. Others might have called themselves minstrel companies, but the brevity of their required services did not encourage an organization, for so many would have been difficult to compensate for the time and trouble requisite to support the same."

"However, there were four members of the cork fraternity who undertook the venture of an organization. Their names were Frank Brower, Billy Whitlock, Dick Pelham and Dan D. Emmett. They went into a thorough course of rehearsals at the boarding house of Emmett, 37 Catharine street, New York, kept by one Mrs. Brooks. They were all diligent in their labors (late January, 1843), and it did not take long to acquire the scanty versatility necessary in those days for a cork professor to delight his patrons."

"The cause of their organization was simply to make up a combination of negro stuff for one night which was expressly for the benefit of Pelham, who at that time was dancing between the pieces at the Chatham theatre, New York. Their rehearsals were sufficiently encouraging to satisfy them but they had found a novelty and to suit the term nowadays they thought they could first try it on the dog (Pelham's benefit)."

"This was their title, 'Virginia Minstrels.' They made their debut at the Chatham theatre Feb. 17, 1843. They were received with deafening applause. During the same week they played one night for the benefit of Mr. John Tryon, then manager of the Bowery Amphitheatre. Their performances here met with astonishing success, so much so that they were secured by Messrs. Welch and Rockwell, then managers of the Park theatre, at which place they performed two weeks in conjunction with the great dancer, John Diamond."

"This was about the middle of February, 1843, and after this they proceeded to Boston where they played six weeks with wonderful success. They then returned to New York and performed for Manager Simpson at the Park theatre. Having now fairly introduced their novelty and expectation every day to meet with determination on a trip to England where all idea of rivalry was out of the ques-

tion for a time at least. "Accordingly, with George B. Woodbridge at their head, they immediately embarked for Europe. Hence arose the various minstrel companies that are now in existence. On the arrival of the Virginia Minstrels they immediately gave two concerts in Liverpool. From there they proceeded to the Adelphi theatre, London, at which place they performed six weeks in connection with Prof. Anderson, 'The Great Wizard of the North.'"

It is interesting to note here that the Daniel Decatur Emmett of this original negro minstrel company was the same Emmett who in 1859 wrote the song which became to the south what the 'Marseillaise' is to France. "I wish I were in Dixie." He wrote many other songs which are still popular, but none that compared with this. Presumably from Emmett himself Mr. White obtained the following information about "Dixie," which he wrote in his diary:

"One Saturday night in 1859 when Dan Emmett was a member of Brant's Minstrels at Mechanics hall, New York, Dan said to Emmett:

"'Can't you get us up a walk-around dance? I want something new and lively for next Monday night.'"

"At that date, and for a long time after, minstrel shows used to finish up the evening's performance with a walk-around dance, in which the whole company would participate. The demand for his especial material was constant, and Dan Emmett was the principal composer of all, especially for the Bryant Minstrels."

"Emmett had course to work and as he had done so much in that line of composition he was not long in finding something suitable. At last he hit upon the first two bars, and any composer can tell you how good a start that is in the manufacture of a melody."

"The next day, Sunday, he had the words commencing, 'I wish I was in Dixie.' This colloquial expression is not, as most people suppose, a southern phrase, but first appeared among the circus men, in the north. In early fall when nipping frost would overtake the tented wanderers the boys would think of the genial warmth of the section they were heading for and the common expression would be: 'Well, I wish I was in Dixie.'"

"This gave the title or catch line, the rest of the song was original. On Monday morning the song was rehearsed and highly commended and at night as usual the house was crowded and many of the auditors went home singing 'Dixie.'"

"The song soon became the rage and several other minstrel organizations, such as Buckley's, Campbell's Morris Bros., &c., applied to Emmett for copy and privilege of using it. Mr. Werlein of New Orleans wrote to Emmett to secure the copyright, but without waiting for an answer, published it, with words by a Mr. Peters."

"William Pond of New York city secured it from Emmett and it has been said gave him \$600, but Werlein sold thousands of copies without giving him a cent."

"Not only was Emmett robbed of the profits of his song but the authorship of it was disputed as well. Will S. Hays of Louisville actually claimed it as his own. He told a friend of Emmett's that he wrote it at the breaking out of the war. But he was talking to the wrong man that day, and was told so."

"Mr. Pond brought the matter before a music publishers' convention and settled the question, of authorship. But Dan reaped no benefit from this tardy justice."

"Emmett got into trouble about his song during the war. It was considered a rebel song, and a sapient editor in Maine declared that Dan was a Secessionist and that he should be treated as one. Although the song had been written two years before the commencement of the rebellion, as originally written there was not a line that could be charged with any political bearing."

"The growing popularity of this well-known ditty was secured in New Orleans in the spring of 1861, when Mrs. John Wood played an engagement at the Varieties theatre. 'Pocahontas,' by John Brougham, was produced, and in the last act a Zouave march was introduced."

"Carlo Patti, brother of Adeline Patti, was the leader of the orchestra. At the rehearsal Carlo was at a loss as to what air to appropriate. Trying several he at last hit upon 'Dixie.' Tom McDonough shouted: 'That will do!'

"Mrs. John Wood, Leffingwell, J. E. Owens and Mark Smith were delighted. Night came and the Zouaves marched on, led by Susan Denin, singing 'Dixie.' The audience became wild with delight and seven encores were demanded."

"Soon after the war broke out the Washington Artillery had the time

arranged by Romeo Minevi as a quickstep. The saloon, the parlors and the streets rang with the 'Dixie' air."

Some of the confusion that has arisen over the original minstrel company may be explained by the fact that the success of the Virginia Minstrels tempted others to enter this field. While they were in England another troupe called Ring and Parker's Minstrels also appeared there. They performed in Liverpool while the Virginia Minstrels were playing in London."

One of the members of the company took the character of Lucy Long which evidently must have originated with him. White's diary says, of this second company:

"They afterward performed at the Garrick theatre, London. They arrived in Liverpool three or four weeks after the Virginia Minstrels, having organized in Boston at the time the Virginia Minstrels were playing there."

"As soon as the Virginia Minstrels left New York for England there was organized a company presenting themselves to the notice of the public here as the Kentucky Minstrels. This I shall term the second organization, because they got to work here in America before Ring & Parker's Minstrels reached England."

"Some little time after their organization they disbanded, but soon reorganized under the same name and performed at Vauxhall Garden with the following persons in 1843: William Whitlock, T. G. Booth, Barney Williams and Charley White."

"Ring and Parker's was the third band and the fourth was the Congo Melodists, very soon after known as Buckley's New Orleans Serenaders, composed of members of the Buckley family, the father and three sons. They opened in Boston in May, 1843, in Tremont Temple."

"The fifth band was the original Christy Minstrels organized in Buffalo and opening in New York in 1846."

"The Christy Minstrels claimed that they organized as early as 1842, which is a very great mistake. They were organized late in 1844 or early in 1845. Dickenson was the man who showed them how to operate. He was a circus man and Christy was a ringmaster."

"There was a band known as the New York Minstrels, who played in Apollo Rooms, 410 Broadway, Feb. 15, 1844, with whom Barney Williams, Jerry Hallett, Howard and Charley White were connected. Their existence was brief. The Sable Sisters and Ethiopian Minstrels appeared at about this time with the men mentioned above and three women known as Angelique, Annette and Pauline."

"Then came the Ethiopian Serenaders, which during the short time that minstrelsy had been in operation, made great improvements. This was the first company that introduced black dress suits. They organized in Boston and came to New York and performed at the Chatham theatre."

Among the other bands described in Charley White's diary were the Sable Harmonists, Georgia Champions, Original Campbell Minstrels, Sable Brothers, Nightingale Serenaders, California Minstrels, Congo Minstrels, San Francisco Minstrels, Ordway's Eolians, Pierce's Minstrels, Morris Brothers, Pell & Huntley's Minstrels, Fox & Warden's Troupe, Mrs. Matt Peel's Campbell Minstrels, Hooley & Campbell's Minstrels and Barlow & Benedict's Minstrels, all of whom flourished before 1860. Haverley's Minstrels were organized in 1865."

Among the "celebrated individuals who have used burnt cork" he mentions Edwin Forrest, Joe Jefferson, Edwin Booth, John S. Clark, George Holland, John Gilbert, John B. Gough, Dan Rice, P. T. Barnum, Joe K. Emmett, William Scanlan, Dave Bidwell, Dick Risley, McKee Rankin, Worrell Sisters, Lucile and Helen Western, Billy Barry, George Julian and Neil Burgess."

"The Ethiopian and Comic Drama" by Charles White, puts him down as author of a great many songs and sketches, among them being "Villains and Dinah," which was very popular forty years ago."

Apparently, the great majority of popular songs written fifty years ago were composed by negro minstrels. More than forty of Dan Emmett's songs were published and many of them have retained their popularity until today.—New York Sun.

Easily Explained.

"I had an amusing experience the other day, which convinced me that one cannot always depend upon names and appearances," said a bureau chief in one of the government departments.

"Being in need of a new clerk who spoke German, I requested that one be supplied me, stating that I preferred a clerk of German extraction,

as the work I had for him to do required a good knowledge of that language. The following day the messenger entered my room and informed me that the new clerk was in the ante-room."

"What is his name?" I asked.

"Patrick Delahanty," was the reply.

"Why, I want a German, not an Irishman," I said.

"Well, sir," the messenger answered, with a peculiar expression, "that was the name he gave me."

"I told the messenger to show the new clerk in. Imagine my amazement when in walked a man whose color and features were emphatically African. He smiled and waited for me to recover my breath and speech."

"Is your true name Patrick Delahanty?" I asked.

"Yes, sir."

"But you are colored."

"There is no doubt about that, sir."

"And you speak German, with an Irish name in the bargain?"

"Perfectly."

"In what part of the south were you born and raised?"

"I was not born and raised in the South at all, sir."

"Whereabouts?"

"In Weehawken, N. J., on the heights, opposite New York."

"You are certainly a mixture of incongruities," I exclaimed; "please explain more fully."

"Well, sir," he said, "my people were servants for several generations for a northern family of wealth of Irish extraction; who lived in Weehawken, where there is a large German population. We took as our

own family name, as is the custom in the south, that of the family whom we were attached both by vice and regard. This explains the incongruity of a colored man having such a decidedly Irish patronymic my own. I picked up the German language while serving with a family of that nationality, and later made it a feature at night school with my English studies."

"You must have plenty of fun with yourself," I suggested.

"I do; and other people have a lot of fun with me," he answered.

"I found him to be first-class material for my purpose."—Washington Star.

Miners in Session

Special to the Daily Nugget. Denver, May 29.—Three hundred delegates are attending the convention of the Western Federation of Miners and the Western Labor Union at Denver. They represent miners in the western states and British Columbia. Eugene V. Debs, in addressing them declared socialism the only solution of industrial problems. He counseled laboring men to join political action to overthrow the present competitive system.

A small matter, but one which will prove of convenience and shows consideration, is the rate issued by the postoffice department directing that all mail matter officers and crews of United States vessels shall be carried at domestic rates of postage. No matter whether the ships may be, whether in Europe or Europe or Samoa or South America, two cents will carry any letter weighing less than an ounce.

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