

THE BANJO'S ORIGIN.

IT WAS LONG IN USE BEFORE THE DAYS OF JOE SWEENEY.

He Was an Ancient Polk Miller, and Had Charmed Two Continents—The Writer's Reminiscences and Incidents of the Famous Instrument.

DEATONVILLE, AMELIA CO., VA.
February 13, 1895.

To the Editor of the Dispatch:

I read with pleasure your editorial in last Sunday's issue, entitled "Who Invented the Banjo?" The Dispatch is correct. The banjo was long in use before the day of Joe Sweeney. It was principally played on by the negroes, and was indeed a rude and simple instrument. The first one I ever saw was made in this way: A large gourd covered with a raw sheep-skin served for the drum, and the strings were of horse-hair, pulled from a white horse's tail. It had only four strings. I am confident that Sweeney added the bass string. My father's carriage-driver was a banjo-player. He played two or three changeless tunes on one cord. I saw Joe Sweeney for the first time about 1842, while I was at school at Prince Edward Courthouse. He and his brother Sam were together. Joe led on the violin and Sam played the banjo. Both had good voices, especially Sam, a rich, full, baritone of great sweetness and power. Even at this distant day I can recall some of the tunes they sang—"Old Dan Tucker," "Do Johnnie Booker," "Jubanna Johnson," "Oh, Susanna," "The Blue-Tailed Fly," "Jim Crack Corn, and I don't Care."

When I saw the brothers again the character of the music had somewhat changed, and was much more sentimental and sympathetic. They rendered such pieces as "Dearest May," "Rosa Lee," "Annie of the Vale," "Nelle was a Lady," and "Ellen Bayne," with wonderful effect. These airs were melodious and concordant, and often brought tears to the eyes of the audience. Joe Sweeney was above the medium "size," and of fine proportions. He had light hair and a ruddy complexion. He had wonderful facial powers. He could change his expression in a moment from grave to comic.

NEVER OVERDID IT.

Sweeney, as a negro delineator, was inflexible. He knew the negro well and was perfectly natural, and, like Polk Miller, never overdid his work. One of his performances always excited applause. His old Virginia break-down, a jig tune, he danced, and made his own music with his banjo hung around his neck with a string. Sweeney was entirely uneducated; but he was naturally bright, and he often made smart local hits that brought down the house. Yes; the Dispatch is right. Sweeney gave notoriety to the banjo and brought it into popular favor. His habits were imprudent and he was the subject of many temptations. He lived a life of unselfish generosity and died in poverty. He spent his last days in the county of Appomattox. I have heard this story about him. I do not vouch for its truth.

HIS LAST WORDS.

Just before he died, while his mind wandered, he said to his sister: "Come here. The old banjo is out of tune, the screws are slipping, and the bridge is about to fall." These were the last words of the old fellow, who had charmed two continents with his melody and song. His brother Sam was in the cavalry service during the war. He often played for General Stuart, and the brave troopers would dance to his merry music, as he sang:

"If you want a happy time, join the cavalry."

I never heard of him after the war. Joe Sweeney taught me how to tune my banjo and taught me the chords. I shall never forget my ecstatic pleasure when, under his guidance, I played.

"Reel, reel row, my true love; oh, come along, my darling."

Since the days of Joe Sweeney wonderful advances have been made in banjo music, and as well as he played, he could not compare with such players as Shackelford, or the Davis brothers, of Richmond. They have gone away beyond him in variety and technical execution. In fact, the mode of playing has changed. I do not know but one man now who can give the real old Joe Sweeney touch, and that is Polk Miller. He can do it when he wants to. In my early days my banjo served me a good turn.

A GOOD TURN.

When I went to Princeton College I carried my banjo with me. No one had ever seen the instrument in the town. No one had ever heard a negro song. I was the recipient of much hospitality and good cheer. I cannot say that my banjo added anything to my scholastic proficiency. While at Princeton I organized a minstrel troupe. In 1851 I took a long and tedious journey to the far-off State of Texas. I rode a mule 2,000 miles, and had my banjo strapped on my back.

ARKANSAS-TRAVELLER STORY.

The old instrument often gave me a home and shelter at night. I will recall an incident. On a terrible, stormy day I rode up to a log shanty, covered with raw-hides. I hallooed outside, and after a while a woman came to the door and asked me what I wanted. I told her that I was a traveller and wanted shelter from the pitiless storm. In a sharp voice she said: "You can't stay here; the old man is gone up the river after pine-knots, and me and de child'en is pine by ourselves; and you can't stay." I begged and implored, and I thought there might be some talismanic power in the name Virginia. As a final appeal I told her I was a Virginia gentleman.

"Oh," she said, "go away with your fool talk. The last man who stayed here said he was from Virginia, and he stole every spoon in the house."

After a while she saw my banjo and she asked what it was. I told her. She said: "Will it make a pretty racket?" I said: "Oh, yes. I will play for you." She said: "Come in and stay as long as you want to. I ain't he'rd no music since I left Tennessee." The next day I started on my lonely journey, with the promise that if I ever came that way I would call to see her.

FIRST CONCERT.

In about six weeks I reached the Gulf of Mexico to take the steamer for New Orleans homeward bound. It was a stormy time, and the boat could not make the landing. For several days I waited in the hotel at Port Lavaca. While there an incident occurred that made me give my first concert. A poor German woman, with four little children, whose husband had fallen overboard on the voyage, was on the dock without money or friends. The citizens asked me to give an entertainment for her benefit. I consented to do so. The whole town turned out to hear me. We secured \$50 for the helpless stranger. The next morning I went to see her and gave her the money. She got down on her knees, and with streaming eyes she thanked me over and over again. I remember that woman's face, though most half a century has passed away. That greeting of gratitude was the happiest moment of my poor life.

But where am I drifting? Alas! I am no longer a banjo-player. My fingers are old and stiff. The chords respond no more to my uncertain touch; my voice is cracked and tuneless. The old banjo is unstrung and silent, but even now, in some lone hour, I think I hear the refrain of the sweet old songs I sang long ago mingling with the tones of my old battered banjo I played when a boy.

JOHNNIE REB.

JOE SWEENEY AND HIS BANJO.

Another Story Corroborative as to the Origin of the Instrument.

To the Editor of the Dispatch:

Your editorial in the Dispatch of the 10th instant concerning Joe Sweeney and his banjo calls to my mind the opinions held by his neighbors concerning the great banjoist.

He was a son Joel Sweeney, Sr. I knew both father and son. His home was about one mile northeast of Appomattox Courthouse (then called Clover Hill) on the road leading to Buckingham Courthouse. Here Joel Sweeney, (Old Joe he was called), the banjoist, was born and brought up. I have often heard it said that he was the first white man who ever played a banjo; that he was taught to play by a negro, who invented the banjo; that the body, or taborine, part of the first banjo was made of a large gourd. This negro belonged to Dr. Joel Flood, whose estate lay east of the

Sweeney place. Dr. Flood was grandfather of Joel W. Flood, who now owns the Flood estates in Appomattox, and is the father of Hon. H. D. Flood, State Senator from Appomattox and Buckingham counties.

ALL MUSICIANS.

Joel Sweeney, the banjoist, had two brothers, Alex and Samuel, who were also skilled in the use of the banjo. Samuel performed finely on the violin. Alex, died in Washington, D. C., and Joel died at home some time before the war. Samuel was in some capacity connected with General J. E. B. Stuart during the war, and is mentioned several times in "Surry of the Eagle's Nest." He died in the hospital. These three, Joel, Alex, and Sam, were the three principal characters in a concert company which travelled extensively in the South in the by-gone days.

I have heard some noise and twanging on the banjo since the days of the Sweeneys, but it seems to me I have heard nothing from that instrument since then worthy of the name of music. This may be but the prejudiced opinion of an old man who thinks the former days were the best.

APPOMATTOX.

THE ORIGIN OF THE BANJO.

Polk Miller Has Something to Say, and Describes His First Instrument

PHILADELPHIA, PA.

February 8, 1895.

To the Editor of the Dispatch:

Permit me to thank you for coming to my rescue in claiming that the banjo—the instrument which you know as the banjo—originated in Virginia, and, as an instrument worthy of the notice of "good society," was first introduced by old Joe Sweeney, of Appomattox county, Va. The instrument which Mr. Sutphin, of Glasgow, Ky., says "was played upon by the boatmen of James river before old Joe's time" came about as near being the banjo, as we know it, as the monkey does of being a man—strongly resembling us, but not quite up to the mark.

The first banjo I ever saw was made as follows: The rim was a large cymbaling gourd with a hole cut in the top and bottom, a staff running through the centre of it, and horse-hair strings were used.

My first banjo was made out of an old cheese-box, covered with sheep-skin for the head, a piece of garden paling for a staff, and the hair from "Old Whitey's" (my father's riding-horse) tail for strings. These strings did not wear very well, but we kept on drawing on the horse's tail for supplies, until we were threatened with a licking for disfiguring the animal. About that time Joe Sweeney had returned from England covered with honors, and, as a banjo-player and singer of the enlivening old tunes of that day, such as "Old Dan Tucker," "Gwine to Run all Night," "Go It, Napper," "I am Gwine Down to Lynchburg Town," etc., created as much excitement around country court-houses as the coming of Barnum's circus does at this time with the small boys.

THE CATS SUFFER.

When my father threatened to whip me for pulling the hairs out of the horse's tail I was told that Joe Sweeney used "cat-gut strings," and my chum and I started on the war-path in search of the "variety," killing thirteen cats in one week.

I told this story to Mr. Moody when on his last trip to this city to show how I was misled when a boy into murdering a lot of cats without accomplishing my object, when he said, "Ain't that the way you got 'em?" He said that he had thought all of his life that the strings used on musical instruments were nothing more than the entrails of the cat, and it created a great laugh among his friends when he made that candid acknowledgment. I think you had a piece of poetry in your paper a short time ago on the origin of the banjo, and it went to show that Ham invented the banjo while in Noah's Ark. I will not describe the banjo which Ham used at that time, Joe Sweeney was the first man who ever entertained an audience with the banjo, and I have it from good authority that the cat-gut string was first used by him on that instrument, although that kind of string may have been used on other instruments before old Joe's time.

It cannot be denied that the thumb-string was his invention, and without that particular string no player could pick the old Virginia reel tunes which made the banjo so popular, and which caused an old fellow to say to me once, "I can't help patti'n' o' my foot when I hears de banjer, an' de 'Miss Siple Sawyer' is de dancin' tune I ever heared."