

Copy of “Dixie” in Winthrop Archives

By: Louise Pettus

Around 1919 a Winthrop College student, Minnie Parker, spent the summer with her parents near Hendersonville, N. C. Their next-door neighbors were an elderly couple, Prof. Herman F. Arnold and his wife. The couple often visited with the Parker family.

Minnie was enthralled with the stories the professor had to tell about how he happened to set down the music for the song “Dixie.” As the professor told it, he was leading his band, called the Arnold Band, in 1859 when he happened upon Dan Emmett, a singing minstrel.

Emmett, a native of Mount Vernon, Ohio, wrote the song one rainy Sunday afternoon in New York City. His troupe travelled over the U. S. and acquainted audiences North and South with the catchy words and music of “Dixie.”

Arnold asked Emmett if he would give him permission for his band to play “Dixie.” Emmett answered, “There is no music, I just play it by ear.” Arnold thought the song and music too good to not be written down.

While Emmett played the tune on his violin, Arnold wrote the music on the wall of an opera house dressing room. The block of plaster on which Arnold wrote is still preserved by an Alabama museum.

The Arnold Band played the tune at the inauguration of Jefferson Davis on February 18, 1861 in Montgomery, Alabama. “Dixie” was played as the first Confederate flag was raised. President Davis let Arnold know that he thought the tune would make a fine anthem. Quickly, the cheerful tune became the favorite song of the South.

“Dixie” was not just a Southern favorite. Abraham Lincoln used “Dixie” as a campaign song and, after his election, asked the Marine Band to play it in the White House.

Arnold was a native of Germany. His father, who headed the department of music at King’s College in Prussia, sent 14-year-old Arnold and his brother to America in order to prevent their being drafted into military service. Herman Arnold’s first American job was as a member of the orchestra at the Metropolitan Opera. He played the first French horn ever played in the United States.

Arnold said that the music was copied thousands of times but he had made only 3 other autographed copies. One he had given to the United Daughters of the Confederacy of Memphis, TN; another he had given to the State of Alabama and the third copy to a grandson who was named for him. (The grandson gave his copy to Grove Park Inn in Asheville, NC.)

In 1964, Harold Schonberg of the New York Times wrote the Winthrop Alumnae Association that there was nothing to the story that Professor Arnold wrote the music. He said all authorities credited Dan Emmett as the author and composer.

Minnie, or Mary as she was known in her old age, refuted Schonberg. She wrote that she asked her 86-year-old friend to autograph a copy for Winthrop College and he did so. He wrote above the music, “By request of Miss Minnie Parker this copy of ‘Dixie’ is made for Winthrop College.”

The Winthrop University Archives keeps the prized copy made by Arnold under lock and key.

Arnold died in 1927 and his wife the following year. They are buried in an impressive marble mausoleum in Memphis. As long as they lived they were honored guests at Confederate reunions all over the South.

The United Daughters of the Confederacy, Asheville, NC chapter, dedicated a granite boulder to the memory of Dan Emmett in the “Open Air Abbey” at Fletcher, NC. Nearby is another granite boulder in honor of Herman Arnold, thus honoring one man for the words and music and the other for preserving the music.

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