

The East Montpelier Musical Convention

The East Montpelier Musical Convention was started in eighteen ninety-eight and continued until nineteen twenty-nine. These conventions were conceived, managed and conducted by Charles F. Dudley.

The convention was held in January and tradition has it that it was always held on the full of the moon. This was probably true since it would make night travel easier. Also, at that time of year, they didn't interfere with haying, sugaring or any other of the necessary occupations of living.

The convention lasted two days, with rehearsals starting at ten in the morning on the first day and resumed soon after the noon meal. As no one knew the songs they had to be completely learned during the short time before the performance. In the afternoon of the second day the complete concert was put on in the form of a matinee, and the concertmaster put on the finishing touches for the evening performance. The songs used were semi-classical, Negro spirituals and great church hymns.

There were few trained singers in the group. The singers came from Barre, Montpelier, Marshfield and other near by towns and sometimes there were people from Burlington, which in the old days of the convention was a distant town. It was remarkable that in such a small radius so much talent could be found and brought together for an evening performance. Each member of the chorus was required to pay a small fee to cover the cost of music and the meals. There was often as many as sixty-five in the chorus but the average was about fifty.



The noon and evening meals were served in the hall where the performance was to be put on, and they were traditional Vermont specialties. On the first day "red flannel" hash was served and a chicken pie supper was given on the following day. There was a dance after the concert and after this an oyster supper was served. For many years the planning and serving of these meals was directed by Mrs. Delta Young, with a corps of helpers. Some of the food was cooked and brought in by the

people of the town and some was done at the hall.

The hall in which the conventions were held was built sometime in the early eighteen nineties (it was torn down in the nineteen sixties). The money to build the hall came from subscriptions of \$25.00 each.

It is to be pointed out that these conventions were given solely for the purpose of sociability and the fun of singing together. During the earlier conventions they served as one of the few entertainments of the year. What entertainments there were were few and far between so the people looked forward to Mr. Dudley's conventions with a great deal of interest and anticipation.



Each year a few soloists were hired. Some of these came from out of the state but most of them were local talent. Sometimes at these conventions musical trios would be presented. In the later year concerts Mr. Frederick English and Mr. Howard Reid of Barre were among the chorusers. Miss Sylvia Bliss then of Calais was also one of the accompanists.

Since East Montpelier was a small town it could offer no hotel accommodations so the singers were entertained in the local homes. Because central heating was virtually unknown at this time each room had to be heated by a separate stove. Having the convention may have been fun but it was never the less a strain on the housewives nerves. Mr. Dudley was the one who had to get all of the accommodations for his singers but since Vermont hospitality is second to none it was not hard.

All during the conventions and at other times Mr. Dudley himself took personal care of the hall. It is large enough to accommodate about two hundred and fifty people. The basement contained stalls for about sixty horses and during the horse and buggy days these were filled to capacity. One story has it that at one concert the horses made so much noise it was difficult to hear the singers.

People often had a little trouble getting to the concert. One year the snow was so deep that the special train, which was run from Burlington, was stalled for sometime, and since the old cars were not too well heated the passengers were a little cold when they finally reached their destination. However, the good times they had at the convention more than made up for any discomfort they might have suffered.

Mr. Dudley was born on February 20, 1855, the son of Samuel and Sarah Putnam Dudley and the youngest of eight children. Mr. Dudley's parents had very little means with which to give their children much education; and therefore he never attended school beyond the eighth grade. He spent his entire life in East Montpelier. During his lifetime he owned and operated a small farm near East Montpelier village. He served as selectman and road commissioner for the town and was a rural mail carrier for sixteen years.

Although he never had any formal education in music Mr. Dudley had the natural talent and gift of a great musician. He taught music in East Montpelier and many of the singers at the concerts were his pupils. He also went as far away as Groton and Bradford to give lessons.

All of his conducting was done from memory. He would start early in the fall to learn his music so that by the time the convention arrived he knew them all by heart. This was also the time when his accompanists learned their music and spent many happy hours in the home of Mr. Dudley and his charming wife. He was greatly interested in his music until the end of his life but during his last years could do little with it. He died on July 4, 1932 at the age of seventy-seven.

Believing that the pleasure and fellowship found in singing together were then as beneficial as in those earlier year, Goddard College in Plainfield, a neighboring town to E. Montpelier, in 1959 undertook to revive the custom. The plan met with enthusiastic interest and cooperation from the "alumni" of the former conventions as well as from other music-lovers, and the sponsors were encouraged in their desire to make it an annual occurrence again. As a result of this effort three concerts were given. Mr. Marsters York, director of vocal music at the college conducted them. As in the olden days the singers came from far and near to join their voices in the chorus. They were conducted in much the same manner as of old. The people came to the college for the two days of rehearsals and enjoyed the accommodations, which the college could furnish. These concerts were held in the dining room of the college. Although these conventions had to compete with all the modern forms of entertainment they still attracted a good attendance.

At the last three conventions some of the music used in the earlier concerts were sung. Mrs. John (Ruth) Walker of North Montpelier who was one of the singers in Mr. Dudley's last concerts took part in the 1950 concert at Plainfield. In the 1951 concert there were soloists from Greensboro, Lyndonville and East Cabot, Vermont, East Holden and Waterville, Maine.

The accompanists at Goddard in 1952 were Miss Dawn Crawford of Houston, Texas and Mrs. Margaret Coleman and daughter Lillian of Plainfield, Vermont. Mrs. Coleman taught music at Goddard College and Miss Coleman was a student.

It is the feeling of the people of East Montpelier and other towns that no better memorial could be given Mr. Dudley than that these musical conventions should be continued.

Note: this article was adapted from one found in the family archives. The original author who dubbed himself "Sir. Clarence Oliver" is unknown. [David A. Coburn]