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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Distinguished City Musician Recalled

By NEIL A. MATHESON
Provincial-Farm Editor

HENRY WESTAWAY VINNICOMBE was born at Exeter, Devonshire County, England March 15, 1843. He was a chorister in Exeter Cathedral from 1853 to 1863. He was also a member of Exeter Oratorio and Philharmonic societies. He came to Canada in 1864 and to Prince Edward Island in the following year.

I have heard a great deal about Prof. Vinnicombe since I came to Charlottetown more than 30 years ago. W.A. (Art) Gaudet, with whom I worked many years at the old Patriot on Richmond Street, often sang his praises, as "an outstanding musician and a most talented and interesting personality".

An old newspaper clipping kindly loaned me by his daughter Mrs. A.E. Davis, 55 Fitzroy Street, says he founded a family here which was the first of that name in Canada.

Musician Of Great Ability

"He was a musician of great ability", the old clipping states, "and one of the first teachers of violin in Charlottetown."

"He was for many years bandmaster of the 82nd Regiment band, and he was founder and leader of the Charlottetown orchestra . . . He directed the orchestra in the then opera house, until it became a motion picture theatre", the old newspaper said following Professor Vinnicombe's death in November 1928.

Professor Vinnicombe established the City's first band, also the first orchestra, I am told reliably.

Judge (Jim) Hyndman, a former Charlottetown man now living in Ottawa, is the only member of the Vinnicombe orchestra who is still alive.

It was the highly skilled technical advice obtained from Prof. Vinnicombe, I was told some time ago, that was responsible for the excellent acoustics in the old Prince Edward Theatre, which many readers remember with pleasure. "A pin dropped on the stage, could be heard distinctly at the back of the theatre" is the way one lady described the acoustical quality to me.

Professor Vinnicombe used piano wires to correct the acoustics of the building, I was told. I have been unable to learn just how this was accomplished.

Came To Province On Visit

I WAS particularly interested in the way Mr. Vinnicombe happened to come to this province. Though he was thoroughly schooled in music at home, the young man's reason for coming to Canada had nothing to do with music. "My father came to Canada

on a dare, with a group of other young men who were going to the Hudson Bay” his daughter told me. I believe the occasion was a gold find or some such thing.

His mother, who was a Westaway, wrote the young man urging him to go to Prince Edward Island and visit Roger Dart Westaway, Georgetown who was a large shipbuilder.

Mr. Westaway had three sons and one of them who had no children of his own, took an immediate liking to Henry Westaway Vinnicombe and showered gifts upon him. This man “made things so comfortable for my father” Mrs. Davis told me, “that he decided to stay on Prince Edward Island”. He would never leave, she added.

Many Musical Entertainments

LOOKING OVER the many clippings from Charlottetown newspapers of the period, I am impressed by the many musical and literary entertainments that were made available in the city at the time. And the name of H. W. Vinnicombe was the most prominent, I noticed.

There was a “Grand Amateur Concert” at the Athenaeum under the patronage of “His Honor, Sir Robert Hodgson, Knight, Administrator” – that was on May 10, 1870.

There was a “Grand Amateur Concert” under the patronage of Lieutenant-Governor W. C. Robinson and Mrs. Robinson in the Market Hall on May 4, 1871.

There was “Literary entertainment by the Charlottetown Debating Club” and this featured several piano-violin duets by Sam Earle on the piano and Professor Vinnicombe.” The talented pair were listed five times on the program.

On another occasion there was literary and musical entertainment by the Charlottetown debating club, which appeared to be a most active organization. There were readings, poems, essays and musical selections, with the Earle-Vinnicombe pair supplying all of the musical numbers.

There was a “Grand Ballad Concert” under the distinguished patronage of His Honor Lieutenant-Governor and Mrs. Robinson, the Right Reverend Bishop McIntyre, the Legislature and the Mayor and Corporation, as it was termed.

This one was in aid of “French Relief Fund”. The date was Monday, March 27, 1871. S.N. Earle was the musical director at this one.

Music Was Classical

THERE WERE many of those concerts by talented performers, it is apparent from the descriptive stories written about some of the most publicized performances. In all cases the music was classical, the old report indicates.

I note too that Miss Bessie Vinnicombe – now Mrs. Davis – was a featured performer in many of the concerts. She was listed, for example, as “pianist” in the Second concert of the Charlottetown Philharmonic Society on May 13, 1902. Indeed she was the featured soloist in one of the numbers “Astre de Notre Amour”, a “Recitative and Aria”.

One of the interesting numbers I noticed called for “10 hands on five pianos” and they were playing Mendelssohn’s Wedding March. This concert was at the Athenaeum, which was later known as the Lyceum theatre, and it was located on Prince Street, approximately across from where the United Church now stands.

Care Of Pianos Spelled Out

I WAS interested in some rules “for the preservation of the pianoforte” given by Mr. Vinnicombe in an advertisement listing him as a “tuner, regulator and renovator”.

“The room in which a piano stands should be kept at a moderate temperature – from 50 to 89 degrees Fahrenheit. Below this temperature the wood is apt to swell and thus impede the freedom of action. The metals, the iron frame and the strings contract, thus making the tune sharper.

“Above 89 degrees the wood of which the case is made becomes too dry and so contracts, while the strings expand, hence the piano does not stand well in tune.

“It is very important the piano should be protected from dampness, Mr. Vinnicombe said. It should never stand on a damp ground floor, or against an outer wall, or between two windows, or between a door and a window where there is a current of air.

“The piano should be kept closed when not in use. It should also be covered with a cloth to protect it from dust.

Mr. Vinnicombe tuned instruments for many years. One newspaper clipping I have in my possession says he once “retuned a piano throughout, in the short space of 15 minutes”. This was done when it had been discovered, just before a concert, that “the pitch of the piano did not agree with the other instruments”.

Tuning Instruments Stolen

HIS DAUGHTER, Mrs. Davis, tells me that her father stopped tuning instruments when his valuable case of tuning instruments was stolen from the hall of his home. The instruments had been brought from England and could not be replaced, his daughter told me.

This occurred some ten years prior to his death – that would be somewhere prior to 1918 – and it meant the end of his career in that capacity. His daughter purchased several instruments in New York – there were two tuning hammers and the price indicated they should be good.

But one of the hammers split the first time her father used it. This was added discouragement, particularly to a man who had long been accustomed to the best of instruments. It confirmed his opinion that he could not carry on without the instruments he had lost. And he never could get a trace of them, his daughter tells me.

I RETURNED last night from an interesting two-day tour of the Annapolis Valley tobacco farms. I'll be talking about it in next week's farm column.