

AN AUTHENTIC ACCOUNT OF THE FOUNDING OF THE WHIFFENPOOFS

by The Rev. James M. Howard, Yale Class of 1909

During the early nineteen hundreds a coveted privilege for any member of the Yale Glee Club was to be chose to sing in what was then known as the Varsity Quartet. This group was featured in every concert given by the "Yale Glee, Banjo and Mandolin Clubs," whether on their annual tour of the country during the Christmas holidays, at the Junior Prom and Commencement festivities, or in various nearby cities.

At alumni dinners and smokers all over the East, as well as at undergraduate functions, the quartet's services were in demand. Even a staid Phi Beta Kappa banquet once sought the group out to enliven their evening following an after-dinner speech delivered by one faculty member completely in Latin and a scholarly address delivered by then President of Princeton, Woodrow Wilson. Thus, what with getting new songs ready and polishing up old ones for public occasions, the four fortunate enough to be chosen, plus one or two alternates, acquired a great deal of experience in singing together.

This was particularly true during the winter of 1908-9 when we had a quartet of veterans. Carl Lohmann, known to generations of Yale men as "Caesar," and his classmate George Pomeroy had accomplished the incredible feat of beginning their services on the Varsity Quartet during their Freshmen year. Traditionally, the Glee Club of those days was composed almost entirely of juniors and seniors, but these two youngsters had voices the Glee Club couldn't afford to miss, and having proved their worth in the chorus they were selected for the quartet too. I sang with them as a sophomore that year, and the following season another member of their class, Meade Minnigerode, joined us. By midwinter of their junior year and my senior year, we had sung together so much that, to an extraordinary degree, we had the feel of each other's idiosyncrasies and instinctively blended into a well-rounded musical entity. We enjoyed singing too well to limit ourselves to public occasions. So did Denton Fowler, a lighthearted senior affectionately known as "Goat." He had been an alternate member of the quartet and often joined us as we sang on Old Campus, in Vanderbilt Court, or in what was then Berkeley Oval, the quadrangle were White, Fayerweather and Lampson Halls used to stand where the acoustics were out of this world.

Regular meetings at Mory's

As winter weather in New Haven is hardly suited to out-door vocalizing, and life was too crowded with activities for us to look each other up for a song, one day Goat Fowler suggested to Minnigerode that we go to Mory's once a week. There we might have an early dinner, sing our songs in comfort, and get away in time for later appointments. We began it one evening in January, 1909, and soon it became a habit to keep inviolate that weekly date: Mory's at six.

Louis Linder, proprietor of the "dear old Temple Bar," was delighted, for he loved good singing. Moreover, the music brought customers; many who enjoyed listening took to dropping in for a meal or glass while we five poured forth our souls in unrehearsed and often spontaneously-altered harmony. Lohmann's gorgeous bass, which became so familiar to New Haven music lovers in later years, Minnigerode's effortless tenor which knew no top note, and the inventive genius of Pomeroy, whose accurate ear and extraordinary range enabled him to fill in a fifth part in any passage which might be enriched by it, were priceless assets. And these, coupled with the perfect sense of pitch, timing and feeling for harmony which the whole group shared, produced an effect which - at least in memory - suggests Tennyson's lines about how ". . . mind and soul, according well, may make one music as before, but vaster."

Two members of the class of 1909 were among those who came regularly to Mory's on such evenings. Neither Dick Hosford nor Bob Mallory could carry a tune, but they loved to listen to our singing and were drawn by it to the table where we sat. We welcomed their company and dubbed them our trainer and manager. They took over the not too arduous duty of ordering the mutton chops or scrambled eggs and sausage which were standard dishes at Mory's in those days, and the beer which was our lubricant. No cocktails, no "cup." The emphasis was always on singing, not on eating and drinking, and the fellowship was one of song and song-lovers.

Adopting a Name

After our meetings were well established we decided it was time to adopt a name. We were perhaps influenced in this by an older group with whom all of us had sung from time to time the previous year. They called themselves The Growlers, and they have their place in Whiffenpoofs history. Originally, their number had included Ludlow Bull, '07, and Rosewell Park, '07S, but these two had graduated. The remaining Growlers - Philip Collins, Nathaniel Holmes and Mark Mitchell, all of 1908 - were joined by others of their class, and there was always a welcome for any of our quartet who happened along. Bereft of Lud Bull's lovely tenor, they were particularly happy to have Minnigerode join them regularly, and the rest of us did so whenever we could.

It was Goat Fowler who suggested we call ourselves The Whiffenpoofs. He had been tickled by the patter of one of the characters in a Victor Herbert musical comedy called "Little Nemo" which recently been running on Broadway. In a scene in which there was great boasting of terrific exploits in big game hunting and fishing, comedian Joseph Cawthorn told a fantastic tale of how he had caught a Whiffenpoof fish. It seems that Cawthorn had coined the word some years before when he and a fellow actor were amusing themselves by making up nonsense verses. One they particularly liked began: "A drivaling grilyal yandled its flail, One day by a Whiffenpoof's grave." Cawthorn recalled the verse in making up his patter for "Little Nemo" and put it into his act.

Whether the word meant fish, flesh or fowl was irrelevant to our purpose when we chose it as our name. "Whiffenpoof" fitted in with our mood of free and exuberant fancy and it was adopted with enthusiasm. As Carl Lohmann later explained: "We were Whiffenpoofs because if your infuriated us with food and drink, we came up and squaked." The word quickly caught on with "our public," and the name stuck.

The Whiffenpoof Song

Members of the Glee Club, on their Christmas trip in the winter of 1907-1908, heard someone sing an unpublished setting of Kipling's "Gentlemen-Rankers" at an alumni smoker after their concert in Columbus, Ohio. Although this song is known to have been sung at Yale as far back as 1902, and while it was not unfamiliar to some of those present at the smoker, to many if not most of us it was entirely new that night, and it was an immediate hit. Pomeroy recalled that the whole crowd sang the chorus several times; Lohmann recorded a similar memory on our thirtieth anniversary, and Minnigerode, in a letter to me in 1958, described a still vivid impression of hearing it that night for the first time.

At the piano during the smoker was Judge Tod B. Galloway, Amherst class of 1885, whose setting of another Kipling poem, "The Gypsy Trail," had been on the concert program. For many it was believed that he composed the music for "Gentlemen-Rankers." Indeed, in the copyrighted version of the Whiffenpoof Song, published in 1935 by the Miller Music Corporation and included in "Songs of Yale" edited by Marshall Bartholomew, '07S, the tune is attributed to Tod B. Galloway."

My faith in the Galloway hypothesis was shaken when, as I was preparing the first version of this

article for the Whiffenpoofs 50th Anniversary pamphlet, Carl B. Spitzer, class of 1899, wrote me that he had evidence that the music for "Gentlemen-Rankers" was composed (of all things) by a Harvard man. To his sure knowledge, one Guy H. Scull, Harvard class of 1898, had set this ballad to a tune which was sung during his undergraduate days at Cambridge. A friend of both Spitzer's and Scull's, Mrs. Beatrice Ayer Patton (whose husband, General George Patton, made history in World War II) had said that she often accompanied Scull and his companions on the piano when they sang it. And, although there was no manuscript or printed copy of the music, she had made a recording of it for Spitzer. The resemblance between this and the Galloway version was so close that it left no doubt in the minds of those who heard it that what we enjoyed that night in Columbus originated not with Galloway but with Scull.

About that same time, Marshall Bartholomew wrote me that Sigmund Spaeth, in his History of Popular Music in America, had declared that "it is now established that the tune was probably composed by Scull of Harvard, although Galloway is still given credit for it."

Still later, in researching for his unfinished History of Music at Yale, Bartholomew turned up a traditional Negro spiritual in which the recurring theme in the verse of our Whiffenpoof classic was sung with the words:

Been a list'nin' all de night long,
(To the tables down at Mory's)
Been a list'nin' all de day,
(To the place where Louis dwells)
"This phrase," Bartholomew said, ". . . repeated three times in the verse and twice in the refrain, . . . completely dominates the song."

Whatever its origins, "Gentlemen-Rankers" was frequently sung at Yale in 1907-1909, mostly by the Growlers, '08, with whom it was a favorite. The late Charles Seymour, '08, a lover of song and an acceptable baritone (who prized his election as an honorary Whiffenpoof almost as much as his earlier elevation to the Presidency of Yale), recalled that the Kipling ballad had been sung in chorus at the 1908 Class Day exercises. It was natural, then, that when the Founding Five began their singing dinners at Mory's the following winter, "Gentlemen-Rankers" was one of "the songs we love so well," along with "'Shall I, Wasting' and 'Mavourneen' and the rest."

It was Meade Minnigerode and George Pomeroy who got the inspiration for a Whiffenpoof adaptation. One evening they brought out a manuscript on which they had collaborated, and read to us the now famous words:

"To the tables down at Mory's, to the place where Louis dwells,
To the dear old Temple Bar we love so well,
Sing the Whiffenpoofs assembled, with their glasses raised on high,
And the magic of their singing casts its spell."

Anyone familiar with Kipling's poem can appreciate how these new words transmute the cynicism of an old barrack-room at some forsaken outpost of the British Empire to the genial atmosphere of Mory's. In the original, one sees a group of young aristocrats, disinherited perhaps, serving as enlisted men in Her Majesty's forces and drinking themselves to death as one of their number sings a verse:

"To the legion of the lost ones,
To the cohorts of the damned,
To my brethren in their sorrow overseas,
Sings a gentleman of England

Cleanly bred, machinely crammed,
And a trooper of the Empress, if you please."

[All join in the chorus:]

We're poor little lambs who've lost our way,
Baa! Baa! Baa!
Little black sheep who've gone astray,
Baa-aa-aa!
Gentlemen-rankers out on the spree,
Damned from here to Eternity,
God ha' mercy on such as we,
Baa! Yah! Bah!"

The bitterness disappears in the Whiffenpoof Song. The gentlemen songsters off on a spree (mutton chops and beer at Mory's!) may sing of being damned from here to eternity, but they don't a word of it. The whole spirit of the song is changed to a light and playful humor in perfect keeping with the name and the mood of the Whiffenpoofs of 1909.

When we sang it for the first time that evening at Mory's, we knew that was IT! One can almost hear Lohmann's characteristic exclamation: "Gentlemen, this is immense!" "This," cried another, "should be our national anthem!" "Yes," added a third, "to be sung at every meeting, all reverently standing!" And so it was. And so it is to this day.

The Constitution

Although I am sure none of us really believed we were Founding an Institution, we made believe that we were when someone suggested that, to insure perpetuity, we should have a Constitution. Ideas to be included in such a document immediately burst forth from one after another seated around the table. Undoubtedly it was Lohmann who jotted them down, for the meticulous accuracy which he became famous for during his years as Secretary of the University was foreshadowed in his undergraduate days. It must have been he who typed the manuscript brought in for our approval, for when the original, framed and hung on the wall at Mory's was stolen some years later, Caesar calmly produced a carbon copy from his files to replace it.

A model of simplicity, the Constitution contained General Laws, Special Laws, and By-Laws. It limited the membership to seven, and to emphasize this, a motto borrowed from Wordsworth was included: "We are seven." Provision was made for only two officers, a trainer and a manager. And the future was guarded from corrupting changes by Article IV of the General Laws: "This Constitution shall not be amended." Perfection had been achieved!

Or had it? The very next year two daring innovations were introduced. When four 1910 songsters (Carleton A. Connell, Thomas Hewes, Frederick Hotchkiss and Reginald Roome) were chosen to replace the four who graduated in 1909, the number still stood at seven. But after Christmas holidays an eighth member was added. Ted Coy, a song lover with a good ear and a nice tenor voice, who had hitherto been too busy acquiring fame on the football field to have time for music, became a Whiffenpoof. To cover the heresy, he was given the title "Perpetual Guest."

The second innovation was more dramatic. Meade Minnigerode recalled that "Ted Coy's prom girl joined us for the Whiff sessions, sang us a swell song, and was duly elected an Honorary Member . . . When she appeared with Coy in Woolsey Hall for the Prom concert, we gathered around her and sang her the Whiff Song, just inside the door to the auditorium." The lady's name, he said, was Cecile

Marie Charlotte Jeanette Murphy, which accounts for the mysterious initials CMCJM carved on the 1910 Whiffenpoof table at Mory's along with those of the regular members.

There may have been other occasions on which members of the opposite sex were welcomed into this all-male fellowship, but the only one I know of occurred many years later. During the spring trip of the Glee Club in 1935, at a special dinner at Antoine's in New Orleans, Mrs. Marshall Bartholomew was with great ceremony elected an Honorary Whiffenpoof--a distinction accorded to her husband some years earlier. Actually, Bartholomew's intimate association with the Whiffenpoofs even antedated his return to Yale in 1921 as director of the Glee Club, for way back in 1907 and 1908 he frequently sang at public appearances as one of the "Varsity Quartet" from which the original membership was derived.

Time and Change

Over the years such gifted musicians as Marshall Bartholomew, Arthur Hall, Fenno Heath and others have contributed significantly to the increased artistry of the Gentlemen Songsters. Moreover, good musical backgrounds and training are now common, and the larger groups with this kind of equipment make possible a more ambitious repertoire than the earlier members could attempt. The only concern expressed by some "old-timers" is that, with the greater sophistication, modern Whiffs may have lost some of the spontaneity which used to be a Whiffenpoof hallmark.

On the occasion of the Whiffenpoofs' Fiftieth Anniversary, when I was writing the first full account of our ancient beginnings, I spoke for the three of us who were left of the Founding Five. Now, in the words of the prophet Elijah, "I, even I only, am left." Let me then speak for all five of us and declare the confident hope that, for many decades to come, "Gentlemen Songsters off on a spree" will still be singing here at Yale for the joy of their own souls and the delight of their listeners. I think, if we listen closely, we may hear, from a distant shore, four voices joining in a confident AMEN.