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Piano Assassins and Bell Ringers: Itinerant Piano Tuners at the Turn-of-the-Century

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Several years ago, the National Public Radio program “This American Life” featured a haunting story of a 1912 kidnapping of a four-year-old Louisiana boy named Bobby Dunbar. After several weeks, searchers found a youngster who seemed to match Bobby’s description. An uneasy family reunion was followed by a trial and a headline-grabbing controversy over whether or not the boy was actually who everyone assumed and hoped he was. Years later, a journalist concluded that, in fact, the little boy may not have been Bobby after all. It was a remarkable story with hints of tragedy and a large helping of mystery that inspired the book, *A Case for Solomon: Bobby Dunbar and the Kidnapping That Haunted a Nation*.¹

As a professional historian, I thought the tale was a fascinating story of a particular time and place. But as the spouse of Linda Gist Marten, a long-time Registered Piano Technician and PTG member, a tiny detail also caught my attention: The accused kidnapper, William Walters, made a living traveling the deep South as a tinkerer, handyman, organ builder—and piano tuner! Walters was presented as a grizzled, scruffy, backwoods type, making money any way he could. This certainly

is not the image of a modern piano technician, but things were obviously very different a century ago. The story made me wonder if “itinerant piano tuner” was a common occupation in the early years of the 20th century, and if there were any others like the disreputable Walters. After all, piano ownership expanded far outside the nation’s urban areas after the turn of the century. Annual sales of pianos doubled between 1900 and 1923 to over 340,000 per year. Individuals had to service all those pianos appearing on the farms and in the small towns of America. A quick search for “traveling piano tuner” in the millions of pages of newspapers on the Library of Congress Web site and in Google Books™ turned up a surprising number of examples of gypsy

RICH GIRL LURED FROM HOME.

Traveling Piano Tuner Caught and Accused of Abduction.

HARVARD, W., Nov. 7.—Charles Fisher, a wandering piano tuner who a short time ago induced Miss May O'Connor, the daughter of a wealthy resident, to elope with him, was brought back from Chicago after a few hours' absence, by the Sheriff of this county, to-day.

They were met at the station by an indignant crowd of Harvard citizens, and the authorities with difficulty protected the prisoner from violence. He was hastened before Justice Card, who held him in bonds of \$1,000 on the charge of abduction, and then the prisoner was taken to the Woodstock County Jail.

Fisher came here from Chicago a short time ago. Miss O'Connor is at her home.

piano tuners whose reputations were less than stellar.²

Perhaps the most sensational story—at least the one with the worst ending for the tuner in question—occurred in 1904, when “a traveling piano tuner” wandered into Hempstead, Texas, and coaxed a young girl into a “false marriage.” He seems to have deserted her almost immediately, but the betrayed and “ruined” young woman’s brother tracked down the miscreant, and, according to a local newspaper,

“filled him full of lead, which, under the circumstances, was the best thing to do.” Another newspaper reported the arrest of the shooter and his brother (although it is impossible to tell if they ever came to trial) and reported that the deceased, unnamed tuner had “traveled through this section the past year pursuing his vocation.”³

Although most did not suffer such unhappy ends, whether they deserved it or not, the many itinerant piano tuners making their livings in rural America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries earned a poor reputation as con-artists, seducers, and blackguards—not unlike the fictional Harold Hill in the classic musical *The Music Man*. Of course, not all tuners were unwelcome guests in rural com-

munities. Some were perfectly reputable—respected, appreciated, even celebrated. The more prominent ones would check into a hotel, buy an ad in the local newspaper, and wait for customers to call or leave a note at the front desk or some other local business. The ads referred to them as “experts” or sometimes as “Professors.” Sherman H. Thompson, the manager of the music department at a Denver company, was “an expert piano tuner” who worked New Mexico, while “Prof. J. J. Forbett” of Gainesville covered rural Florida and “Prof. S. W. Hamilton” traveled the Southwest. *The Prescott Journal-Miner* announced the arrival in 1898 of an excellent violinist, recruited by the local brass band, who would also give lessons and “engage in piano tuning.” While some stayed in hotels—and at least one covered his territory in a car driven by a chauffeur—others could afford only modest accommodations: W. H. Sheib, in Edgefield, South Carolina, while working on a batch of second-hand pianos that a local entrepreneur planned to sell, would also tune pianos for a few days; clients could find him at Mrs. Ida Sheppard’s boarding house.⁴

The itinerant tuners without regular clienteles who were forced to scramble to make a living were the ones with the unenviable reputations. They were common enough that occasionally they were the butts of jokes. An 1890 story about a young school teacher refusing the attentions of a traveling piano tuner

(teachers in those days would have to resign if they married) had him asking, “Why is it that so many school teachers are old maids?”

Without missing a beat she replied, “Because we do not care to give up a \$60 salary for a \$50 man.” An article about impetuous marriages featured a good-for-nothing tuner who stole a customer’s daughter. “She and her husband and the strings of the piano were never in harmony afterward,” and the marriage collapsed.⁵

These jokes and stories suggest the extent to which traveling piano tuners suffered from public disdain. Part of the problem was that many of them were very bad at their jobs. In an 1891 letter to a trade journal for piano merchants, the president of the Piano Tuning Committee of the New York State Music Teachers Association declared that one of the major problems facing teachers and other musicians was the “tramp, or itinerant, incompetent piano tuner nuisance.” These “tramp frauds” and “piano assassins” were

unable to make simple repairs or even find a true pitch, he wrote, and should be drummed out of the business. A 1918 publication suggesting appropriate trades for soldiers blinded during the First World War warned that tuning was a difficult skill to learn. But it also editorialized on the “class of blind piano tuners known in the jargon of the trade as ‘bell-ringers,’” who used “their trade not as a means of obtaining regular wages earned by conscientious work but as a pretext for obtaining alms [through] more or less open beggary.”⁶

Respectable tuners tried to separate themselves from their less savory counterparts. In 1891, the “largest and most reliable music store in the west” warned readers of an Omaha newspaper that “irresponsible piano tuners were traveling through the state” claiming to be “in our employ or representing us. We would warn the public to beware of them unless they can show proper credentials.” As late as 1920, a Minnesota tuner saw fit to run a disclaimer in a local paper that he would “not be responsible for work done by tramp tuners running around.”⁷

In addition to making false claims about their ability to tune pianos, some itinerant tuners took advantage of their customers’ trust and access to their houses to commit offenses ranging from fraud to robbery. Some simply seemed to be ne’er-do-wells; “a man traveling under the guise of a piano tuner” spent several days near a little town north of Kansas

PIANO TUNER IS HERO IN NEW NOVEL

The piano tuner has come into his own at last. In a new novel, “Mary Wollaston,” by Henry Kitchell Webster, and published by the Bobbs-Merrill Company, the hero is a piano tuner, and in every sense is depicted as a superman. The heroine’s father is a surgeon, and her step-mother an opera singer, which shows that the piano tuner is traveling in good company. Judging from the illustrations in the novel the piano tuner is commanding in physique, as well as in intellect, quite capable of wrestling with a concert grand until it is brought to perfect concert pitch.

City, "working the natives for spot cash and victuals." But others were professional grifters. Several Norfolk, Virginia residents were swindled by a "slick tongued individual" claiming to be a "first class piano tuner" and offering fake recommendations. A Utah woman was "fleeced" of five dollars by a "Smooth Sharper" of a piano tuner. An actual piano tuner—at least the newspaper report claimed he had tuned a piano—with a broken nose, a German accent, and the ability to speak four languages made off with a Kentucky couple's jewelry and a pair of pants. The police reported he had been "operating" throughout central Kentucky during the winter of 1897 and 1898. A Nebraska tuner, highly recommended by a local school teacher, ended up paying his bills by forging that friend's signature on numerous checks.⁸

Perhaps even worse were the stories—like the one at the beginning of this article—in which tuners seduced naïve women. A cautionary tale about impetuous love featured a "traveling piano tuner" as one half of an ill-fated marriage. In 1896, a "rich girl" was "lured from home" by a "traveling piano tuner" passing through Harvard, Illinois. Somehow the cad had convinced the young woman to clope with him. Authorities tracked the couple to Chicago and brought them back to the girl's home, where the tuner barely escaped lynching by the mob that met the train at the station. He survived, but the authorities threw him in jail and set bail at \$1500.⁹

Although it is impossible to tell what percentage of traveling tuners were con-men and criminals, there was clearly something

about them that bothered mid-western and southern Americans. When the well-known Missouri congressman Champ Clark was upset in the election of 1894 by a political novice, the winner, one William Treloar, was ridiculed as a "traveling piano tuner." He wasn't—he was actually a music professor at Hardin College—but it must have seemed ludicrous to readers that a man as lowly as an itinerant piano tuner could possibly defeat a respectable candidate. At least one honest tuner was victimized by his colleagues' bad reputation when lawmen arrested an Ohio man possessing a bag of suspicious-looking tools on suspicion of being a professional burglar; he spent a night in jail before finally being released.¹⁰

The reputation of traveling piano tuners seems to have improved in the 1920s. A syndicated story called "The Open Road" featured Sydney Blair, a failed poet and writer who managed a meager living by heading out on the "open road" every summer and tramping around the country tuning pianos. The feel-good story has Blair rescuing an injured and amnesiac old man and paying for the stranger's life-saving surgery with his meager earnings. The old man recovers his health and his memory—turns out he was quite wealthy—and writes Blair a check for \$5000, changing his life forever.¹¹

An even more impressive specimen appeared in a 1920 novel *Mary Wollaston*, whose hero was actually a piano tuner. In its review of the book, the *Washington Herald* called the tuner "in every sense... a superman." He was "commanding in physique, as well as in intellect, quite capable of wrestling with a concert grand

until it is brought to perfect concert pitch." The book was a combination soap opera, psychological romance, and behind-the-scenes show business novel. Most of the action revolved around a loving but bickering family of New York opera singers. (The title character is the featured performer at the Ravinia festival north of Chicago one summer.) Anthony March, the tuner in question, did not tramp around the countryside looking for pianos to tune, but as a musician and composer of modern operas, he projected the air of a slightly bohemian free spirit. At one point, he manages in just a few hours to complete a heroic repair of a beat-up square grand. He has other good qualities, too, but saving the day by repairing the hopelessly out-of-regulation piano helps him win the hand of the title character after a rather on-and-off-again romance.¹²

"The piano tuner has come into his own at last," declared the *Herald*, and it does seem that lurid and dismissive stories about hapless or criminal tuners disappeared from the popular press during the decade after the First World War. Despite the rather plentiful anecdotal evidence, there really is no reason to think that piano tuners were any more dishonest or less trustworthy than other itinerant craftsmen in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There were no doubt plenty of plumbers, peddlers, and band instrument salesmen who also robbed and seduced and defrauded their customers.

But piano tuners seemed different. Perhaps it was because owning a piano was the symbol of middle-class respectability, and owners of those symbols hated to have that respectability challenged

by being duped by con-men. Perhaps it was due to the fact that because inviting a tuner—usually, for small-town Americans, someone from out of town—into one's house was a demonstration of trust and even intimacy that could easily be abused. Perhaps it was because tuners may have seemed a little mysterious—unlike other skilled craftsmen, a tuner's most important talent was invisible; they pulled a pitch out of thin air to bring pianos magically back to health. They must have already seemed like magicians to at least some of their customers, and when they turned out to be bad wizards or worse, it stuck in people's minds more than the shenanigans of other men of the road. □

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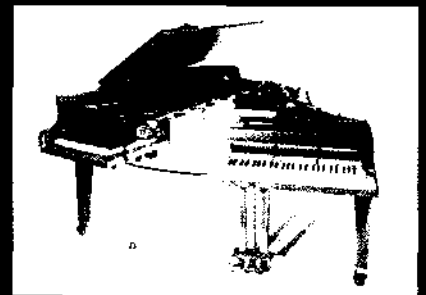


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