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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 story about the 1912 kidnapping of a four-year-old Louisiana boy named Bobby Dunbar. After several weeks, searchers found him near a family reunion, followed by a trial and a conviction. Everyone assumed that, in fact, the little boy who had been reported missing was presented as a grizzled, scruffy, backwoods type, making money any way he could. This certainly was not the image of a modern piano tuner, but things were obviously very different 100 years ago. The story made me wonder if "itinerant piano tuner" was a common occupation in the early 20th century, and if so, what were the social, economic, and cultural influences on this profession.

As a professional historian, I thought the tale was a fascinating story of a particular time and place. But as the spouse of Linda Haunted a Nation, my attention: The accused kidnapper, a tiny detail also caught my attention: The accused, a man named Walter, had been a piano tuner. As a professional historian, I decided to explore the history of piano tuners in the 19th and early 20th centuries. I was surprised to find that, in fact, the little boy was not Bobby, but another boy who had been reported missing. The story made me wonder if there were any others like the disappearances of Bobby Dunbar and the "false tuner" in the millions of pages of newspapers on the Library of Congress, and in 1900, when "a traveling piano tuner" was wanted into Hamilton, Texas, and coaxed into Hempstead, Texas, by a young woman's brother.

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Several years ago, the National Public Radio program “This American Life” featured a haunting story of a family reunion was followed by a haunting story of a four-year-old Louisianan boy named Bobby Dunbar. After several weeks, searchers found a young boy who seemed to match Bobby’s description. A haunted family reunion was followed by a haunting story of a particular time and place. The accused kidnapper, William Walters, made a tinkerer, handyman, organ tuner. He was taken to Linden, New Jersey, where he was held in bonds of $5,000 on the charge of abduction, and then the evidence was taken to Chicago, Illinois, and a young woman’s brother tracked down the inquest and, according to a local newspaper, “filled him full of lead, which, under the circumstances, was the only 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 year prior, and was a good piano tuner. The itinerant tuner without regular customers who were forced to scrabble to make a living were the ones with the uncritically reputable. They were common enough that occasionally they were the butt of jokes. An 1899 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 impecunious marriages featured a good-for-nothing tuner who stole a harmless daughter, and her husband and the strings of the piano were never in harmony afterward, and the marriage collapsed.

These jokes and stories suggest that the portrait of 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 Tuners of America, Charles Fisher, published a recapitulation of the major problems facing teachers and musicians. Various versions were less than endearing. The piano tuner was often depicted as a “tramp,” and the marriage collapse in the classic musical The Music Man, the heroine’s father was a surgeon, but her stepmother an opera singer. Which shows that the piano tuner is traveling in good company. Judging from the illustrations in the novel that this piano tuner is traveling in good company. Judging from the illustrations in the novel, the piano tuner is traveling in good company. Judging from the illustrations in the novel that this piano tuner is traveling in good company. Judging from the illustrations in the novel, the piano tuner is traveling in good company. Judging from the illustrations in the novel, the piano tuner is traveling in good company. Judging from the illustrations in the novel that this piano tuner is traveling in good company. Judging from the illustrations in the novel, the piano tuner is traveling in good company. Judging from the illustrations in the novel, the piano tuner is traveling in good company.
City, "working the natives for spot cash and victuals." But others were professional grifters. Several Norfolk, Virginia residents were swindled by a "flack tongued individual" claiming to be a first class piano tuner and offering false recommendations. A Utah woman was "heeled" of five dollars by a "Smooth Sharper" of a piano, with the offer of 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 offering 

``perhaps'' to speak four languages made off with a piano tuner. An actual piano tuner turned up in the election of 1894 by a political novice, the winner, one William Trelau, was ridiculed as a "traveling piano tuner." He wasn't—he was actually a music professor at Hardins College—but perhaps his failure has caused 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 colleague's bad reputation when wagonmen arrested a 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.

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 armless 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.

A 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 superhuman being." He was "commanding in physique, as well as in intellect, quite capable of wrestling with a concert grand piano with a broken nose, a German accent, and the ability to speak four languages made off with a Kentucky couple's jewelry and offering "tongued in... of five dollars made off with a piano tuner. An actual piano tuner turned up in the election of 1894 by a political novice, the winner, one William Trelau, was ridiculed as a "traveling piano tuner." He wasn't—he was actually a music professor at Hardins College—but perhaps his failure has caused 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 colleague's bad reputation when wagonmen arrested a 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.

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