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

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The Music Man. RICH GIRL LURED FROM HOME.

Traveling Piano Tuner Caught and Assured of Abduction. By James Marten

Piano Assassins and Bell Ringers: Itinerant Piano Tuners at the Turn of the 20th Century

By James Marten
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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, searches found a youngster who seemed American four-year-old Louisiana. A haunting story of a 1912 kidnapping of a headline-grabbing con- hints of tragedy and a large help-thought the tale was a fascination-place. But as the spouse of Linda Dunbar and the Kidnapping That Haunted a Nation. D

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 PIM member, a tiny detail also caught my attention: The accused kidnapper, William Walters, made a living traveling the deep South as a tinkerman, 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 one 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 dis-reputable Walters. About all piano tuners expanded far more than 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 piano tuners whose reputations were less than stellar. 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” was burned to death in 1880, by the sheriff of the county, 30-something. They were met at the station by a man described as a “tramp, tramp, tramp, tramp, tramp.” The tuner was haired young woman’s brother and the marriage was annulled. He seems to have died somewhere in the 1920s, 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 tuner 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 the section of the country pursuing his vocation. 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 movie The Music Man. Of course, not all tuners were welcome guests in rural comminities. Some were perfectly reputable—respected, appreciated, even celebrated. The more prominent ones would check into a hotel, but an ad in the local newspaper invited customers to call or leave a note at the front desk or some other local business. The ad referred to them as “exper-tors” or sometimes as “Pro-fessors.” Stetson J. W. Thompson, the manager of the music department at a Denver company, was “an expert piano tuner” who worked New Mexico, while “Prof. J. J. Forbetti of Gainesville covered rural Florida, and “Prof. S. H. Hemsworth traveled the west.” The Prescott Journal-Miner announced the arrest of an excellent violinist, recruited by the local brass band, who would also give lessons and “engage in piano tuning.” While some stayed in one town or another, others traveled their territory in a car driven by a chauffeur—others could afford only modest accommodations; W. H. Sheth in Edgefield, South Carolina, was working on a batch of second-hand pianos in hotels—and at least one covered rural Florida and may have deserted her almost stepmother as opera singer. “The largest and most reliable music store in the west” wanted readers of an Omaha newspaper that “irresponsible piano tuners were more numerous than one would claim 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.” In addition to making jokes 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 theft to robbery. Some simply seemed to be ne'er-do-wells; “a man traveling under the guise of a piano tuner” spent several days in a little town north of Kansas
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Several years ago, the National Public Radio program “This American Life” featured a haunting story of a particular time and place. But as the spouse of Linda Haunted, the N ational Public Radio program of Bobby O’Connor, the daughter of a wealthy families, was about to match Bobby’s disappearance, it was a remarkable story with hints of tragedy and a large helping of mystery that inspired the musical “Haunted a Nation.”

Perhaps the most sensational story—perhaps 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 seemed to have deserted her almost immediately, but the betrayed and “ruined” young woman’s brother tracked down the cad 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 ever came to trial) and reported that the deceased, unnamed tuner had traveled through the section the previous year pursuing his vocation.

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 jargon of the trade as “bell-ringers,” who usually claimed 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.”

In addition to making them doubt their ability to tune pianos, some itinerant tuners took advantage of their customers’ trust and access to their houses to commit offenses ranging from theft to robbery. Some simply seemed to be ne’er-do-wells; “a man traveling under the guise of a piano tuner” spent several days in a little town north of Kansas and was 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 tracts for itinerant tuners blundered 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 begging.”

Some of the 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 are numerous and the best policy is 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.”

The piano tuner has come into his own at last. In a new novel, “Mary Wellason,” by Henry Kitch-Webb, and published by Bobb-Merrill Company, the hero is a piano tuner, and in every sense as 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 that the piano tuner is handing in physique, as well as 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 "droll-tongued individual" claiming to be a "first class piano tuner" and offering false recommendations. A Utah woman was "reduced" to five dollars by a "Smooth Sharper" of a piano. Another 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 naive women. A cautionary tale about impetuous women. A piano tuner has come to perfect concert pitch.9 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 during the winter of 1897 and early 1900.) Anson Williams was quite wealthy—and writes of wrestling with a concert grand tuner's most important talent was his ability to change the pitch of a piano in 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.10

"The piano tuner has come into his own at last," declared the Herald, and it does seem that lurid and degrading 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. It was because inviting a tuner-usually an amnesiac old man and amnesiac woman, or at least 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 as well as in intellect, quite capable of wrestling with a concert grand...
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