

When Nutley Found its Fun in Blacking its Face | Nutley Yesterday - Today - 1961

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FROM FRED YOUNG

FOUR men on a rope were still pulling and "Doc" Tantom, beloved of all men, was but half way up into the flies of his bosun's chair when the stage lights went on. It is a tribute to the genial dentist and to Nutley's traditional Washington's Birthday Minstrels that the show went on.

With as much aplomb as if his feet were on the ground, Dr. Tantom broke into his comedy song, "Does the Spearmint Lose Its Flavor on the Bedpost Overnight'?" and the audience forgot all about his momentary embarrassment. Of hundreds of such incidents was one of the happiest of Nutley's patrimony of traditions stuffed.

Tantom, a born comedian, was the bright star of Nutley's Minstrels and one of its end men. Arthur Dickinson, who built Nutley's first movie, the Park Theatre, on Franklin Avenue across from old Park School, was the other "Mr. Bones." A softshoe dancer of considerable renown, Dickinson wisely allowed his counterpart across the stage a free hand at comedy. Expert tambourine thumpers were the other two end men, Lester Vreeland and Abner Rutan, and when they were unavailable Dud Shepard stepped in to harmonize in "When My Sugar Walks Down the Street."

The dentist-turned-minstrel was a past master at ad-libbing and it was his weakness at memorizing his script which often put the traditional interlocutor, Charles Hammond, on the spot. Ad-libbing and throwing away the script, Tantom would suddenly turn to the interlocutor with a question. The best Hammond could do in such unhappy moments was to grunt something and Tantom would carry on from there.

Many a staid businessman of today was a minstrel in his youth, for the tradition is comparatively contemporary, but housecleanings and attic fires have destroyed most of the costumes, the scrapbooks of clippings, the once-prized photographs and even the records.

Generally, however, the history of a tradition is this: Before the era of Boy Scouts, the youth of Vincent Methodist Church created a "Naval Brigade," to be followed by a "Signal Corps" at Grace Church. They used to play football and baseball games between the Brigade and the Corps and to buy equipment, the Brigade put on a minstrel show.

An amusing diversion in that long-ago era before radio and television when movies were in their infancy, Nutley took to the minstrels. Capitalizing on popular favor for the Brigade productions, the Nutley Club, a group with no

purpose except to remove the dullness of suburban life, picked up the minstrel idea in 1915.

The Nutley Club held its meetings and dances in the Masonic Hall and under "Tod" Tantom's presidency they were gay. The club had a chance to buy land from William Lambert, then laying out Nutley Park in building lots, to build itself a series of tennis courts. But the club lacked finances. The decision to stage a minstrel show stemmed from that need for funds.

From the first song to the rousing finale, "Show Me The Way To Go Home," the Nutley Club's Minstrel was a hit. Year after year, always staged on Washington's Birthday, the club's show was the top event of Nutley's social season. There was plenty of home grown talent but when it became necessary, outside acts were brought in.

Two imported singers, Bill Hillputt and "Scrappy" Lambert, graduated from the club minstrels to the then-infant radio industry and won everlasting fame as the radio team of "Trade and Mark," sponsored by Smith Brothers, of cough drop fame.

The original capers were staged at Town Hall but when Park School was built and enlarged the setting was the third floor auditorium and then the gymnasium. Several of the last of the long line of shows were staged in the new Senior High School.

Dr. Tantom's unhappy interlude when he was caught halfway from the stage to the flies can be explained by physics. The setting was an airship ride on the "Shenandoah." Four end men were to make their entrance in a blimp, and suddenly with a blinking flash the airship would blow up and the lights would go off.

When the lights returned, but three men would be seen. They would search for Tantom and eventually discover him floating down from the sky with a parasol for a parachute.

Fred Young, who was stage manager for the shows and whose wife furnished an act with her mandolin players recruited from the small fry of town, arranged for three husky lads to pull Tantom up into the flies on a bosun's chair.

Alas, they failed to rehearse the scene and someone fearing "Tod" would be too heavy a load for three rope-pullers, however stalwart, substituted a block and pulley which Hammond used in his work as a steeple jack. No one told the stage manager that the block was geared to a ratio of 1 to 8.

The rope pullers pulled and sweated, pulled some more and tugged, with the ratio of 1 to 8, Tod rose only four inches every time the handlers pulled two feet. Despite all their tugging, Tantom was only six or eight feet in the air when after an overlong wait the lights went back on.

There sat Tantum in his hoist holding his parasol over his head. As the rope was fed out, he came down at a tantalizingly slow speed. Never at a loss for repartee, Tantum joked about his plight and finally burst into the song which hundreds of showgoers came to the minstrels, year after year, to hear him sing with local variations.

The Club minstrels possessed a whale that was as famous in its way as Jonah's animal. In one of the shows, the cast needed a submarine so Fred Young's enthusiastic stagehands set to and made one out of plywood. They built better than they knew, because the next year when the script called for a dirigible, the submarine was hung in the flies and made a perfect blimp.

The third year, the play evolved around a whale, so the sub-turned-blimp was given a tail, a toothy smile was painted on and a whale was born. Alas, the next year the script called for a bus and so the whale was sliced in half and his belly turned upside down, becoming the top of the bus. That ended the whale's acting career.

There was nothing incongruous, either, when the chorus sang "All Alone At The Telephone" during a special presentation, "Nutley '61" supposed to depict the departure of volunteers under Captain Cornelius McClees for the Civil War, an occasion when the minstrels would have you believe Nutley staged a happy farewell party with songs and dancing. One of the songs they sang in that eleventh minstrel show in 1928 was "Stay Out of This Town" which hardly fitted the occasion.

Most everybody in Nutley took part at one time or another in the Club's show. Jack Spooner, a tenor with a successful career in and around Broadway, was the show's singing star. Margaret Dickinson, who later was to have a successful professional career with Dennis Shawn's dancers, was the show's dancing star. Her father was Tantum's opposite among the end men. She later married another member of the cast, Alan Shaw.

Fred Frobose and Margaret Dickinson Shaw often teamed up in specialty dances and, together, gave Nutley its first glimpse of the gyrations of an authentic Charleston.

The five Ames sisters, and later their brother Frank who grew up to join them, were frequently starred in the minstrel along with pupils of their school of dancing which they ran in their home at the corner of Whitford Avenue and Chestnut Street. The five sisters were Dorothy, Alice, Marjorie, Mary Eloise and Barbara Ann. Some of their performing pupils were Helen Myers, Grace Swan, Catherine McAllister, Anne O'Neill, Margaret Bristow, Vivian Mead, Laretta Blake, Lucille Beaumont, Florence Ward and Adele Sherwood.

Edith Poynter, who conducts a school for voice culture here now, sang such dreamy numbers as "There's An Old Spinning Wheel In The Parlor" as a starred soloist.

Town Clerk Florence Eccles Rutan was in the cast, as were Ab Rutan, Cornelius Van Riper and Dudley Shepard and their wives, the La Forge sisters, Gussie and Edna; Chester Ryan and his wife, the former Mildred "Mike" Van Riper; Walter Ryan and his wife; Clinton Townsend and his sister Ethel who became Mrs. Perham Scorso, as well as "Pete" Scorso himself.

Barney Hillman was in the cast, as was his sister Hjordis; Archie Barbata grew up in time to get into several shows at the tail end of a tradition; also William Heitman, Mr. and Mrs. Roswell Young, Mr. and Mrs. Garrett Conover, Mr. and Mrs. Al Lindstrom and Mr. and Mrs. Willard Sawyer.

Sawyer was treasurer and in that role helped to wind up the club's affairs after the lustre of the minstrels dimmed when automobiles brought Broadway so much nearer to Nutley and radio started attracting more customers than the box office did.

Having prospered to a point where the club bought the land and built its tennis courts, the traditional minstrels died with the late 20's. The Nutley Club itself dissolved into the Nutley Club Realty Corporation and Dr. Tantom relinquished the presidency to Clinton Townsend.

The realty corporation sold part of its land holdings to the town to permit it to create Memorial Park in tribute to the dead of World War I, and the balance of the property was sold to the Nutley Tennis Club. The Club gave up its lease on the Masonic Hall and its dances which had featured Nutley's winter social season for a quarter of a century were abandoned.

When the Nutley Club grew tired of blacking its faces, "Tod" Tantom let his enthusiasm penetrate the Men's Association of Vincent Methodist Church which took over and ran the minstrels right up to World War II. "Tod" and Art Dickinson were still the end men, spelled by Jack Fruit and Al Lindstrom, and Charles Hammond donned his white full dress suit and sat in the middle as interlocutor.