

## **Joe's Jottings #9: John R. Sweney, "A Sweet Singer of Israel"**

By Joe "The Songfinder" Hickerson

I have occasionally been asked, was there music in my family? Yes indeed! On the one hand, my father (J. Allen Hickerson, raised in Brooklyn) had a headful of songs and sayings that he would regale us with when an action or something that someone said triggered an appropriate piece. On the other hand, my mother (Mary Elizabeth Hogg, raised in Williamsport, Pa.) sang and played piano



**JOE HICKERSON WITH SOME OF JOHN SWENEY'S SHEET MUSIC**

(as does my brother, Jay) and led us singing from folk and other song books around the piano. Her talents derived in part from her mother (my grandmother, Josephine Hinkson Sweney of West Chester, Pa.), who sang and played both piano and organ. Josephine's father (my great-grandfather) was John Robson Sweney, who in his day was a well-known musician, composer, and song leader. I

heard about him as the composer of over a thousand melodies (mostly to religious texts), and as a leader of thousands of singers at camp meetings in Ocean Grove, N. J., and elsewhere. I'll devote this column to Prof. Jno. R. Sweney (as his name was frequently given).

John R. Sweney (1837-1899) was born in West Chester, Pa., and exhibited musical abilities at an early age. At nineteen he was studying with a German music teacher, leading a choir and glee club, and performing at children's entertainments. By twenty-two he was teaching at a school in Dover, Del. Soon thereafter, he was put in charge of the band of the Third Delaware Regiment of the Union Army for the duration of the Civil War. After the war, he became Professor of Music at the Pennsylvania Military Academy, and director of Sweney's Cornet Band. He eventually earned Bachelor and Doctor of Music degrees at the Academy.

Sweney began composing church music in 1871 and became well-known as a leader of large congregations. His appreciators stated "Sweney knows how to make a congregation sing" and "He had great power in arousing multitudes." He also became director of music for a large Sunday school at the Bethany Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia of which John Wanamaker was superintendent (Wanamaker was the founder of the first major department store in Philadelphia). In addition to his prolific output of hymn melodies and other compositions, Sweney edited or co-edited ca. sixty song collections, many in collaboration with William J. Kirkpatrick (who later became my step-great-grandfather). Sweney died on April 10, 1899, and his memorial was widely attended and included a eulogy by Wanamaker.

I had inherited from my mother a batch of materials about Sweney, most of which came from her grandmother, Lizzie Hinkson Sweney. These included sheet music and scrap books of clippings, as well as three wax cylinders of unknown provenance containing Sweney singing three of his compositions: "Beulah Land," "Cast Thy Bread Upon the Waters," and "Only Remembered." In 1961 I had them duplicated onto reel-to-reel tape at the Indiana University Archives of Folk and Primitive Music (now the Archives of Traditional Music). I donated them to the Library of Congress Archive of Folk Culture (LC/FOLK) before moving to Portland, Or., in 2011. By then, "Cast Thy Bread" was broken, but the other two were relatively whole.

Then, in July 2014, I received an email from Richard Martin and Meagan Hennessey, owners and producers of Archeophone Records ([www.archeophone.com](http://www.archeophone.com)) of Champaign, Ill. Archeophone is a prominent (and award-winning) compiler of historic reissues of early cylinder and disc recordings. One of their current projects, entitled *Waxing the Gospel: Mass Evangelism and the Phonograph*, is presenting ultra-rare 1890-1900 recordings of evangelists Ira D. Sankey, Dwight L. Moody, and their ilk. In the course of their research, they discovered a cache of cylinders made by a local optician at the August 1897 camp meeting in Ocean Grove, N. J., of which my great-grandfather was the musical director. One of these cylinders had no identification but is a male voice singing "The Wayside Cross." This may very well have been Sweney!

They also learned from Judith Gray, the cylinder expert at LC/FOLK, about my Sweney cylinders. I was astounded when they contacted me concerning their interest in these treasures and in the Ocean Grove recordings. I quickly gave my permission to all concerned to have my cylinders transferred to digital form for Archeophone. Then, in the course of their assiduous research, they discovered a notice in the *Washington Star* newspaper which indicated that my family's cylinders were made on April 13, 1892, in Washington, D.C., by the Columbia Phonograph Company on the recommendation of John Wanamaker, who was the U.S. Postmaster General at the time.

But why all this about a publication of religious songs in a folk music publication? As a folklorist, I learned long ago that anonymity was not a necessary requirement for defining what is a folksong. The gospel songs on these CDs are far from being anonymous; in fact many are sung by their composers! But many songs of known authorship do have a life in folklore, including Sweney's two selections. For example, "Beulah Land" ("I've Reached the Land of Corn and Wine"; words by Edgar Page Stites, 1876) was arguably John R. Sweney's biggest "hit" (although he allowed that it was not his favorite). It was so popular that it became widely parodied in the Midwest and beyond. Folklorist William E. Koch wrote an excellent article on the subject: "Beulah Land': A Song of the Plains," *Kansas Quarterly*, vol. 13, no. 2, Spring 1981, pp. 127-50. In it, he traced appearances of "Kansas Land," and thence of "Nebraska Land," "Dakota Land," "Idaho Land," "Oh Prairie Land" (Manitoba), "Saskatchewan Land," "Alberta Land," "Texas Land," and "Bachelor's Land."

"Only Remembered" (words by Horatius Bonar, 1886) was collected by Vance Randolph on August 6, 1927, from Mrs. Frances Hall, who "heard it at Ozark camp-meetings in 1898." Randolph published it in his *Ozark Folksongs* (Columbia: State Historical Society of Missouri, 1950, vol. IV, pp. 64-65). Pete Seeger learned it from this book and sang it with slight changes. Pete's version appears with a copy of the original hymn and a picture of Sweney on pp. 176-77 of his book, *Where Have All the Flowers Gone: A Singalong Memoir* (Bethlehem, Pa.: Sing Out Corporation, 2009). I recall Mike Seeger singing "Only Remembered" at Ralph Rinzler's memorial concert at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in 1995.

One of Sweney's last compositions was "Will There Be Any Stars in My Crown" (words by Eliza E. Hewitt, 1887). This can be found in the repertory of a number of bluegrass, country, and folk performers, including Jimmy Davis, EmmyLou Harris, George Jones, Alison Krauss, Reba McEntire, and Mac Wiseman. My current favorites? Check out the YouTube of the song by the Seldom Scene and the Waterson Carthy aggregation.



The forthcoming Archeophone publication will consist of 3-CDs and a substantial book. It will include Sweney's "Beulah Land" and "Only Remembered," plus the possible recording of Sweney from the 1897 Ocean Grove collection. So, my thanks go to the folks at Archeophone. And thanks especially to John R. Sweney for his music, and for his genes. You were truly (as your gravestone states), "A Sweet Singer of Israel."