

The Sisters of Happy Hollow

A rhyming game indulged in on the way home from a party resulted in words for “Let Me Call You Sweetheart,” song which is still a best seller, loved the world over

By John Lipscomb

Back in the early twenties a judge in a Chicago court looked on glumly as two pianos were wheeled down an aisle and placed in front of his bench. He looked even more glum as a musician, dressed in his Sunday best, sat down at one of them and began playing.

Then the judge drummed his fingers gently on the bench and his face relaxed as the strains of “Meet Me Tonight In Dreamland” flowed from the instrument. A few minutes later another musician moved to the other piano and from it came the same tune, note for note.

The first pianist had played from a song published by a New York firm. The second had played from a score put out by a Chicago firm and within a matter of moments the judge ruled that the Chicago outfit had “lifted” the Dreamland number.

The two most interested spectators in the courtroom, with the possible exception of the executive of the two music publishing houses, were “the sisters of Happy Hollow,” Beth Slater Whitson and Alice Whitson. Beth had written the lyric for the song, which had been the nation’s Number One tune, off and on, since it was published in 1908. Beth already was famous along New York’s Tin Pan alley and her younger sister had gained a measure of attention after collaborating on Beth’s second most popular song, “Let Me Call You Sweetheart.”

The lawsuit was only the beginning of troubles that were to beset the two – and especially Beth – during a long, successful career of writing songs, poetry, short stories, factual articles, and movie scenarios. There was another occasion when a faker was feted in Memphis after announcing that he was the composer of “Let Me Call You Sweetheart,” and the case of a flat-broke song writer in Chicago who by error got credit for writing the “sweetheart song,” as the girls called it, after his death.

Beth is dead now and Alice, whose tomboyishness has been somewhat tempered by the passage of the years, is able to look back with humor upon the fakers and the others who sought to steal a bit of glory. Six years younger than red-haired, dreamy-eyed sister Beth, Alice Whitson Norton is content now to operate a literary mill from which she turns out hundreds of poems and short stories every year which bring to her a fair income. She lives in Nashville at 1001 McFerrin Street.

There is in her writing some of the tenderness that characterized the work of Beth but generally her verse is more matter of fact. She prefers to write for children’s magazines and has built up a sizeable market for short stories as well as poetry.

Beth and Alice started writing poetry as soon as they learned to spell and Mrs. Norton recalls that one of their favorite games was to make up verse with each supplying alternate lines. That, she said, was how the chorus of “Let Me Call You Sweetheart” came to be written and it was she

who supplied the title for the song that has been published in all of the more important languages of the world and which today is still a best seller.

The two singing sisters of Happy Hollow, down in Hickman County, had been to a party where one of the games involved the making of rhyme. They kept it up on the way home and while they were preparing for bed it occurred to Beth that it might be possible to turn out a love lyric and enter it into a national contest that was then in progress.

“For a title,” Alice suggested, “How about ‘Let Me Be Your Sweetheart?’”

Beth glanced out a window toward the woodlands near their small home, watching the play of moonbeams on the gently moving leaves, and then she announced:

“It’s no good. The word ‘be’ doesn’t sound right.”

The remake was typical of Beth, whose affinity with words already had raised her far above the standards of those who write only doggerel and are content with any lines that rhyme. Alice apparently had some of the same sensitivity toward word meanings because she came back almost immediately with another idea.

“How about ‘Let Me Call You Sweetheart?’” she suggested, and Beth approved.

From that starting point they entered the rhyming game again and alternated lines through the chorus:

*“Let me call you sweetheart,
I’m in love with you;
Let me hear you whisper
That you love me too.
Keep the love light glowing
In your eyes so blue;
Let me call you sweetheart,
I’m in love with you.”*

Beth already had collaborated with Leo Friedman (he’s dead now, too) on “Meet Me Tonight In Dreamland,” and again she and Friedman, a New Yorker, went to work on “the sweetheart song.” Friedman wrote the music and it became a hit. For a while it was forgotten, then revived and as in the case of many popular songs, became and even greater success than it had been originally.

“Meet Me Tonight In Dreamland,” published in 1908, had been played and sung in most of the world’s big concert halls long before the sweetheart song came out in 1912 and it generally is considered Beth Whitson’s masterpiece, though there are those who will argue that “Let Me Call You Sweetheart” is heard more often when amateur (and often alcoholically sentimental) quartets get together.

Mrs. Norton expressed no preference for either and looks with equal sentimentality on both of the world-famous songs, though her sentiment is all for her sister’s portion of the work and not for Friedman’s. She is of the opinion that he didn’t do right by Beth in the matter of royalties and it is possible that she is entirely right, though Beth apparently forgave the morose but gifted tunesmith and continued to collaborate with him.

Most certainly it is true that Friedman, as sharp a businessman as he was a musician, invested the measly sum of \$15 in one of Beth's songs, set it to music, then sold the composition for \$7,000 of which the red-haired Hickman countian got not a single penny. The transaction, through, was entirely legal and in an article that she wrote many years later Beth said that it taught her a lesson – a lesson that caused her henceforth to demand royalty instead of outright payment for everything she wrote. Even that system did not always work out, her sister recalls.

On one occasion a New York publisher offered her \$500 outright for a song and she refused it, insisting on a royalty agreement. She got the agreement but shortly afterward the firm went broke and was placed in receivership. For a long time nothing was heard by Beth of either the firm or her song, then one day she discovered that new operators of the publishing organization had "plugged" her song to success and had boomed its financial return to fantastic proportions. However, the new operators carefully neglected to obtain the address of Beth or send any checks to her. The company was sued but nothing ever came of it and for a long time Beth bewailed her lack of good judgment in not accepting the original \$500 offer.

The Dreamland song continued to supply a varying income throughout the lifetime of Beth Whitson but it was "the sweetheart song" that caused the most trouble for the two sisters – even though its income was most certainly welcome.

There hadn't been any question about who wrote "Meet Me Tonight In Dreamland," with the exception of the dispute that was settled in Chicago and even that did not actually involve authorship of the song but rather technical matters of copyright.

The popularity of "Let Me Call You Sweetheart," though, brought out a horde of no-goods and rascals who sought to capitalize on the genius of small, wide-eyed Tennessee girl. The trouble continued even after the death of Beth in 1932. (actually in 1930 but printed in error in the story)

One night, Alice received a call from a friend in Memphis who reported that a glib-tongued character who was being entertained and otherwise treated as royalty in the Mississippi river city because he was the author of the lyric to "Let Me Call You Sweetheart." The friend promised to notify the Memphis newspapers of the hoax, which was done, and then Mrs. Norton got a call from one of the papers asking her to verify the fact that she and her sisters were the writers. She did. The "author" left town quite suddenly.

On another occasion, Mrs. Norton came across a clipping from a Chicago paper reporting the sad demise of a man named Herman Kahn, whom the paper listed quite matter-of-factly as the author of the famous song. It was a short story and described briefly the circumstances concerning the man Kahn's death which apparently was a result of going too long without food.

Adding gall to the vinegar, the newspaper in the last paragraph of its story commented that "Beth Slayton Whitson (it should have read Slater, of course) rose to fame singing the sweetheart song."

Nobody to this day has figured out how a bit-time Chicago paper could get itself so misinformed, but since Kahn had gone to whatever reward that poverty-stricken song writers go to, there wasn't much point in doing anything about it.

The sisters of Happy Hollow lived well for several years after the publication of the two most famous songs. The income from these as well as the returns from scores of other lyrics that Beth and Alice sold allowed them to buy new curtains for the house in Happy Hollow, to paint the

house, and to buy all of the necessities and many of the luxuries of which they had been deprived for so many years. The rest of the family rejoiced and the rest of the community admired, but nobody ever quite understood the two not believing that it was possible to make a living “just by turnin’ out rhymes.”

Both of the girls proved that the unbelievers were wrong. Of the two, Beth perhaps was more resentful of the “you-can-do-it” attitude than was Alice, though she was understanding enough and kind enough to be forgiving. She was also determined enough to ignore taunts, jokes, hardships and to go ahead with her plans – as proved by her sudden departure for Chicago when she was only approaching the stage of young ladyhood.”

After buying a train ticket to Chicago (incidentally, the railroad inadvertently sold her a ticket via the ridiculous route of St. Louis) she had \$30 left. With her \$30 and a small bag of clothing that included an ill-fitting coat-suit, Beth invaded America’s second largest city. She almost lost the fight. It was the first big town she had ever visited and she didn’t know enough about big buildings to realize the purpose of elevators. For day after day she walked up flights of stairs to the offices of the big music publishers, then waited vainly for hours in hope of contacting one of them.

The folks in Hickman County had told her, though perhaps in not so many words, that she was nutty as a fruit cake for leaving home and expecting to sell songs even to pay for her room and board. The secretaries in the offices of the publishers gained the everlasting ill will of this slender dealer in drama when they expressed much the same opinion and flatly refused to make an appointment for her.

It was a kindly elevator operator who played perhaps as big a rose in the success of Beth and the later success of her sister, as anyone she encountered in the city by Lake Michigan.

In a brief autobiography that she wrote in 1925 for “True Confessions” magazine, Beth had this to say about her experience with elevators and with the gently old fellow who finally put her in wise:

“All these weeks I had been walking up the two flights of stairs (to the office of the Rossiter Music Publishing Company). On this morning the elevator man stopped me at the foot of them, asking why I did not ride up. I admitted that I had not known where the elevator was. Instead of being amused by my ignorance, he told me how to find the elevators in various buildings.”

When Beth got into the elevator, the next passenger who entered was the man she had been waiting to see – Will Rossiter. She introduced herself and in the privacy of his office she had a chance to show the wares that she had been lugging about Chicago for all those days – about 50 song lyrics which represented three years of hard work. Rossiter bought three of them for \$15 each – later bought more, and then introduced her to other publishers who were interested. The net take for the trip was a little bit more than \$200. That was only the beginning.

The closeness of the two sisters is demonstrated in this description by Beth of her return to her lodging house after selling Rossiter her lyrics:

“When I went back to my room that evening I felt as if I were walking on air. I found a letter from Little Sister (Alice). In it she told me that she had been digging ginseng, may-apple root, and yellow percoon, and she inclosed a money order for twenty-five dollars, the amount she had

received for the roots she had gathered. I laughed and wept over that letter and the inclosure. I reproached myself for having felt that I must walk the way alone.

Beth was so excited over her success and so eager to get home and share it with "little sister" that she slammed clothing helter-skelter into her bag, caught the next train, and was halfway back to Nashville before she remembered she had not bought a singer present for the folks back home.

Later, when the money began rolling in, "little sister" Alice had an opportunity to train herself for the writing game and even turned out several song lyrics there were _____ . Her forte, though, as she has come to realize, is children's verse and stories. Not all of her work has been confined to childish appeal, as proved by the success of an early short-short story that originally was published in the Montreal Family Herald and Weekly Star. That publication paid her a relatively small amount for first rights on the story (she had learned a lot from sister Beth about collecting royalties) but its success was phenomenal to her. The story itself was a rather simple one that concerned the adjustments that a young bride found herself forced to make when she moved into a new community but apparently Alice had injected some note of sincerity and understanding that appealed to the men who buy the stories that are published.

The title was, "Tightening the Knot," and it has appeared in family magazines, through syndication, all over the world. Its latest appearance, Mrs. Norton told us, was in an African publication.

Meanwhile, "Let Me Call You Sweetheart" and the ever-popular "Meet Me Tonight In Dreamland" continue to sell and bring royalties to the "little sister," who inherited Beth's interests in the song.

Mrs. Norton holds an interest in all rights to "the sweetheart song" but the other is not covered by the modern "mechanical copyright" law and so she has rights only the sheet music sales, which at the moment are considerable because that song has been bloomed again in the new movie, "In The Good Old Summertime," an M-G-M musical featuring Judy Garland and Van Johnson. Since there are no limitations on what anybody can do with "Meet Me Tonight In Dreamland" except pay Mrs. Norton a royalty on whatever sheet music is sold, Hollywood had done the obvious and changed the tempo from waltz time, in which it originally was written, to a fox trot.

Meanwhile Mrs. Norton, no longer "little sister," continues to operate the literary mill that delights the hearts of children and when she gets tired of her ancient Oliver typewriter she plays with her multitude of Pekinese and Pomeranian dogs, each of which gets as much affection as any ordinary child receives.

"They're my babies," she says, and one gathers that "sister Beth" would have loved them too.

"Neither of us ever had any children," Mrs. Norton said, "but our other sister, Laurie, made up for that lack."

Sister Laurie, who doesn't write at all, has given birth to eight youngsters.

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