

Sweetheart, Dreamland and Money

Sound a chord on the old parlor organ.

We're going to sing a couple of all-time favorites – “Let Me Call You Sweetheart” and “Meet Me Tonight In Dreamland.”

It may surprise you to know what favorites they have been – and still are, for that matter.

They were written 49 and 51 years ago, respectively. Yet, day before yesterday, Mrs. Alice Whitson Norton, co-author of “Sweetheart,” showed me two un-cashed checks totaling \$1533.02. This amount represented royalties on the two songs for the third quarter of 1959.

Mrs. Norton, who lives at 918 Granada Avenue, said 1958 royalties totaled more than \$6,000. They have been as much as \$12,000 a year.

“I used to worry about the royalties lasting as long as I do,” said Mrs. Norton. “Now, I'm just hoping I'll last as long as the royalties.”

Eight years from now both song will be in the public domain and Mrs. Norton will have no further financial claim on them.

A Sister Team

The two songs were written by a Hickman County sister song-poetry-story writing team – Mrs. Norton and the late Miss Beth Slater Whitson. The latter died in 1930.

“Dreamland” was written in 1908 by Miss Whitson. It became a nationwide hit quicker'n you could pucker to whistle the tune.

Up to that time Mrs. Norton, seven years younger than her sister, had made only one literary effort.

She entered a story writing contest sponsored by McCall's magazine. Top prize was \$10 and there were strict rules to go by, she recalls. Her entry was scribbled on rough tablet paper with a pencil.

Pretty soon she got a letter from the editor. It informed her that while she had broken every rule of the contest, they were so pleased with the story they were enclosing a check for \$13.75.

Money Poured In

But “Dreamland” was bringing in so much money at the time there was little need for anyone else in the Whitson family to work. They were the daughters of John H. and Anna Slater Whitson.

Their father was a timer man at Goodrich, a furnace village 10 miles north of Centerville with a population of around 1,200. The village ceased to exist long ago.

But the thing that led up to the writing of “Sweetheart,” Mrs. Norton says, was a country party the sisters attended on night.

At the party a game was played in which one player would make up a line and the opposing player would have to make up another that would rhyme with it. Tomboyish cutup Alice Whitson outstayed them all.

“But that changed things at our house,” she recalls. “Back home my sister told me that anybody who could make lines rhyme like that had loafed long enough and that she was going to put me to work.”

Their first joint effort was “Let Me Call You Sweetheart” and it, too, became immortal verse and has made a fortune.

Hundreds of Songs

For the next 20 years the sister team was to turn out hundreds of songs, poems and stories. The family moved to Nashville in 1913.

Miss Whitson had some 200 songs published. Mrs. Norton has had that many and more.

To this day and every day Mrs. Norton is at her old No. 9 Oliver (“I wouldn’t know how to operate on one of the new fangled typewriters”) turning out reams of children’s songs, verse and short stories. She writes for 25 different publications.

Does her verse come from an inspiration or from some experience?

“Goodness no,” she answered. “I just sit down to the typewriter and let the ideas hit me broadsided.”

She says it took Miss Whitson about 15 minutes to write the two verses to “Sweetheart,” But she spent around two and a half hours on the title and chorus.

Lots of Energy

Mrs. Norton, now 75, is a small woman with beautiful white fluffy hair. She has more energy than a switch engine.

She is gay and colorful and has a habit of grabbing a conversation and holding you spellbound with her wit and good humor.

May some of you have mused up inside when you’ve heard these old songs. But not the grand old lady on Granada.

“I’ve always been more interested in the checks,” she says.

Mrs. Norton writes like a fire in a sage grass field, and she never rewrites anything.

“If I have to do that I throw it away,” she says.

But once she gets her paper in the old Oliver and the first line typed, she’s off and away, Her story grows like a poke shoot in early Spring.

If Mrs. Norton should write another 50 years, though, it isn’t likely she’d ever turn out anything like “Sweetheart” or Dreamland.”

There just couldn’t be any more like them.

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