

# Fiddle Tune History

By Andrew Kuntz

## Ryan's Mammoth Collection, Part IV

As discussed in the last issue, entertainers would go to great lengths to please audiences and thereby increase fame and fortune. Innovation and novelty were the tickets, and performers responded in every way imaginable. Female impersonators had been a staple of theater from at least Shakespearean times, and no less in minstrelsy and variety. The Russell brothers performed a comedy routine as cleaning women, and the famous Broadway team of Harrigan and Hart regularly produced theatricals with Tony Hart appearing in the role of a woman (he was famous for it). Women also appeared as men. The Foy Sisters and the Richmond Sisters were duet acts who sang light sentimental songs for the variety stage; one dressed as a girl, the other as a boy. Male impersonators who could sing believably in a male range were also known to the variety stage, and shared repertoire and performance style with men. Some women performers, according to Gillian Rodger (who authored a PhD dissertation on the subject), “were among the highest paid variety performers of the 1870s and 1880s, earning as much as \$200 a week. They depicted a wide range of masculinity in their acts and were extremely popular with all-male working-class audiences because their acts mercilessly parodied middle-class values, while glorying in the excesses of leisure — alcohol, women and fine fashion.”

Thomas White, whose stage name was Bernardo, was one of the most famous female impersonators, with a long career in various minstrel companies from the mid-1860s until his death in 1880. Bernardo almost exclusively played in New York City companies, and died in Brooklyn. He is represented in *Ryan's Mammoth* by the Lancashire clog “Bernardo's Favorite,” which appears in *O'Neill's*



*Music of Ireland* copied note-for-note as a hornpipe under the title “Humors of Castle Bernard.” Francis O’Neill was not above copying a number of tunes from *Ryan's Mammoth* for his own *Music of Ireland* (printed in 1903, twenty years after *Ryan's* volume), but the name change is peculiar. It may be that he liked the tune but wished to “Hibernicize” the title, or perhaps he thought the tune was Irish in origin and wanted to reclaim it, although it does not sound characteristically Irish. It is quite possible that he would have known of Bernardo’s female impersonation act and wanted to disassociate the music from the source, thus the (rather implausible name for an Irish tune) “Castle Bernard” — a title O’Neill even translates into Irish Gaelic.

## Minnie Foster's Clog



Genuine female performers are also honored with tunes in *Ryan's Mammoth*. Minnie Foster lends her name to a clog in the collection, although her talents seem to have been mostly as an actress, and secondarily as a dancer. In fact, her roles were rather narrowly focused on her portrayal of "Topsy" characters in blackface productions of Uncle Tom's Cabin. Productions of Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin had been staged since 1852 — without the permission of the author, who accounted theatres of the time as threats to Christian character — and were still going strong when *Ryan's Mammoth Collection* was compiled and published. In fact, the public's appetite for the play only grew through the rest of the century, and peaked just before the turn of the century. In 1879, four years before Ryan published, the New York Dramatic Mirror recorded the routes of no less than forty-nine "Uncle Tom" companies. Mrs. Stowe, however, never saw a penny in royalties from any of the multitude of productions, many claiming to be the only "just, sensible, and faithful dramatic version of the original." Given the remarkable popularity and longevity of Uncle Tom plays, it is entirely possible for Minnie to have made a career of her one-character portrayal, which by all reports she did remarkably well. Not everyone was pleased, however. A Lancaster, Pennsylvania, paper declared after one performance: "Minnie Foster's Uncle Tom Cabin Company to fair house, 17th. This is about the tenth Uncle Tom company that has visited us this season, and no more wanted."

"Minnie Foster's Clog" has seen some resurgence in popularity, especially among Irish musicians. Fiddler Sean McGuire recorded the tune several times under the title "The Black Swan," and the tune was also popularized by accordion player Joe Burke. Recently New York Sligo-style fiddle master Brian Conway recorded the melody. Cape Breton fiddlers Angus Chisholm (78 RPM) and Joe Cormier (LP) both recorded the melody as "Miss Minnie Foster."

Finally, we have a jig — the duple time "sand jig" variety, not the 6/8 time Irish jig — by Edwin Christie, named "Lotta's Favorite." The composer was not the renowned Edwin P. Christy (1815-1862) of blackface minstrel fame, but rather was a later-born journeyman composer of light works from the Boston, Massachusetts, area. He was tolerably regarded (at least locally), during his career, but did not achieve nearly the fame of his minstrel namesake. A number of Christie's compositions appear in *Ryan's Mammoth Collection*, and he was attributed more times in the collection than any other, save the Hand brothers, Harry Carleton, and Frank Livingston. Christie's title refers to the actress Lotta Crabtree (1847-1924), who was popular enough to be popularly known by her given name, like Cher nowadays. Although born in New York City, Lotta moved to California at the age of four, following father John Crabtree who had joined the Gold Rush in the early 1850s. They initially settled in Grass Valley, where Lotta proved a precocious talent, especially after tutelage by actress Lola Montez who lived a few doors down. While in Grass Valley she was also taught to play the banjo by Jake Wallace, a minstrel performer of some fame. Lotta was shepherded around by her mother to entertain from mining camp to mining camp while still a child, and by 1856 (when she was age nine) she was playing San Francisco variety theatres, singing, dancing and acting melodramatic roles (some written especially for her), and creating quite a stir. Within three years she was being touted as "Miss Lotta, the San Francisco Favorite." She was "one of the greatest and most famous soubrettes of the American stage," according to Rice, who "blackened up" many times in her early career.

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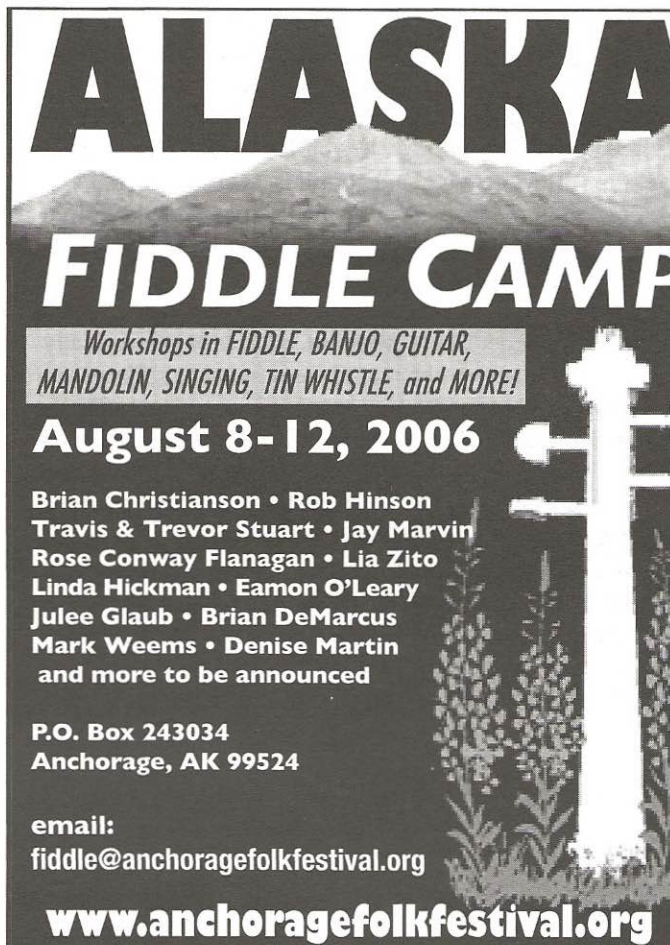
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In October, 1863, she was a member of a minstrel company playing Virginia City, California, at Maguire's Theatre" (pg. 179). During the Civil War years she appeared with minstrel troupes. "Her banjo playing," writes Frank Dumont in an article in the *New York Clipper* (March 27, 1915, "The Younger Generation in Minstrelsy and Reminiscences of the Past"), "dancing, mimicking and grotesque humor were acquired from the minstrels, of course. She was a grand drawing card in the East in later years."

In 1864 she made her New York debut, but was only marginally successful, after which she toured for a few years. There are handbills that advertise Lotta in productions of Uncle Tom's Cabin in Boston in 1868, and again in 1869, where she played the role of Topsy. When she again returned to New York, it was as the star of Little Nell and the Marchioness, adapted from a story by Charles Dickens called The Old Curiosity Shop, and she was a huge hit. She had her own touring company from 1879 until her retirement in 1891, and was much lauded in both the United States and in England, which she visited frequently. When she retired it was to a mansion on Lake Hopatcong, New Jersey, where she remained quietly until her death in 1924. When she died she left a fortune valued at over four million dollars, the product of wise investing which began with San Francisco real estate when she was age twenty-two. Lotta the stage personality was famous for her winsome, childlike appearance, infectious gaiety, and occasionally saucy manner.

[Andrew Kuntz is the author of a book of old time songs and tunes called *Ragged But Right* (1987) as well as the on-line tune encyclopedia "The Fiddlers' Companion" ([www.ibiblio.org/fiddlers](http://www.ibiblio.org/fiddlers)). When not researching tunes, he enjoys playing in Irish music sessions.]



Lotta Crabtree

## Lotta's Favorite