

Mary Wright, Pioneer Musician of Switzerland County

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For four years our county Historical Society has been interested in the development of music in pioneer days in Switzerland County. The life of our first classical musician, Miss Mary Wright, and her Muzio Clementi piano, which was brought to this county in 1817, is now an historical story, stranger than fiction. The piano and two volumes of music were donated to the Society in 1924 and 1927 by Miss Bird Cotton, of Craig Township.

The manufacturer of this piano, Muzio Clementi, was born in Rome, Italy, in 1752. He was educated in England and appeared in a concert at London in 1770, "with unparalleled command of the Piano." His concerts were very successful and continued until 1810. The early piano upon which he played was so crude that he could not express the harmony of which he dreamed and which he composed. So thinking to improve pianos, he invested in Broadrip & Longman Company, 1785, at Cheapside, London. He lost heavily when they failed in 1798. He at once established a new company in his own name, Muzio Clementi, which existed from 1798 until 1818.

Our Piano is marked NEW PATENT, MUZIO CLEMENTI CO.—CHEAPSIDE LONDON, NO. 8736. It is made after the style of the clavichord—seven and one-half feet long, two feet wide and has five and one-half octaves. A thin case of solid black walnut standing on five spindle legs, the hammers, sounding board, and all the interior works are walnut. Each note is set on a peg of its own, fastened into the case proper; they can be removed only one at a time. It has only one soft pedal, placed so near the edge of the case, on the left side, that the pedal, in the

shape of a foot, extends past the edge of the case. It shows very distinctly the evolution of the knee swell to the pedal invented in 1783 and placed in the same position. Clementi is regarded as the father of modern piano technique, distinguished from the harpsichord.

At this early time there lived in London John W. Wright, born 1766. He married Mary Harrison. They were the parents of three children: Mary, born May 11, 1793; Sarah, of the date of whose birth we have no record; John, Jr., born April 8, 1805. They were cultured, aristocratic, wealthy folk; though not titled they expected their children to grace high social position.

That Mary might have all the accomplishments of her time, her father bought her a Muzio Clementi piano. It must have been a happy day when this treasure was brought in to the household, which was furnished with corresponding luxuries and servants to answer every call. They had great social ambition, but financial clouds began to gather over the family. Time drifted by; Mary became a beautiful accomplished young lady, with ideal manners of conventional English society. She attended the concerts of Clementi and, with her mother, was presented at the court of King George III. Her prospects of life were as bright as a summer morning. She was betrothed to the man she loved. In her maiden dreams life was an endless brook, rippling forever through a garden of roses.

In the two volumes of her music, on which her name is printed in letters of gold, is the song "Canzonet" addressed to a young lady on her birthday by G. E. Griffin, printed by Clementi and Company, autographed from the author to Captain South, with the words of hope, "May radiant wisdom guard thy youthful way, with every step thy knowledge to increase, beaming so brightly, that you can not stray from ways of pleasantness and paths of Peace." Another song entitled "Encamped on the Coast" was written by Captain James, melody by Captain South; we imagine these men were her musical friends. This music is written for either piano or harpsichord, with flute and violin. The words are printed with the long English "s." There are also duets composed by Christian Bach, Esq., music master to the Queen. "Remember

Me," dedicated to the Princess Amelia, is dated 1810. The well thumbed pages of the Overture "Chieftain of Ireland" show it was a favorite of hers; it was printed by Broadrip and Longman, 1798, and performed in the Theater, Royal Convent Gardens, London. Other pieces are: "Life let us Cherish," by Mozart; "Softly Sweet in Lydian Measure," by Handel; "Sweet Bird in L'Allegro and Il'Penseroso," by Handel; "Where is this Stupendous Stranger," by Handel (the music is written for the first and second violin and the piano, and the words both French and English); a cantata, "Cymon and Iphigenia," which contains recitations with piano accompaniment; rondos for the harpsichord; "Tell me where is Fancy Bred," duet in two voices, words by Shakespeare, music by Sir J. A. Stephenson, Music Dr., sold by Clementi & Co., 26 Cheapside, London, price one shilling; sonatas for piano or harpsichord, with violin accompaniment by Valinteno Niccolai; and many others.

Mary Wright must have had an excellent, well trained soprano voice, to have sung the music in these selections. "Coming Thru the Rye" is the only popular song in the collection.

The financial crash came, ended was the court, the song and laughter. John Wright, evidently with the consent of his creditors, who could have thrown him into debtors prison for life, decided to come to America to retrieve his fortune. A manuscript of arithmetical problems, signed by John Wright, Jr., London, July, 1817, owned by Harrold Cotton, Jefferson County, Indiana, gives the approximate date of their sailing from London. We can scarcely imagine Mary's woe at the breaking of home ties and separation from her lover (who was to follow when he could arrange his business), and at setting out for an unknown wilderness.

After crossing the sea and the mountains, John Wright purchased a flatboat at Pittsburgh, had it fitted up in an unusual style with private rooms for the family, and furnished it with carpets and even a piano. So they drifted down the Ohio river to Vevay, where they lived on the flatboat for some time while getting located on the land grant. It was here that Mary gave her first concert in Switzerland County, for the French

were wild to hear her play the piano, an instrument many had never heard.

John Wright entered land (original grant number 8699) in Pleasant and Craig townships, Switzerland county, and in Jefferson county.¹ His principal tract was near Five Points, Craig township. There he built a double, hewed log house; i.e., two houses, built with a twelve foot space between them, twenty feet square and one and a half stories high. The poplar logs are chinked with wedges of wood and mortar. It was a most pretentious house in its time, 1817. In front are two old cedar trees and an old well with moss-covered walls.

This house is now owned by Roger Holder and is used for a barn; sheds are built around it, except on one end of one house. Mr. Archibald Shaw, president of the Dearborn County Historical Society, whose grandfather Rous owned the adjoining grant, tells us that one room was lined with bookshelves, Wright having brought a large library with him. The Cotton family has one book from this library, *Aesop's Fables*, with quaint steel engravings. No doubt the furniture was hauled out to this log house in the forest primeval by oxen. When I visited it in August, 1927, we trembled for our tires and springs, so rough were the roads even after 110 years of travel.

The ladies from London tried to keep up their conventional costumes in this backwoods environment. They dressed for dinner in handsome costumes of satin, brocade, velvet, point lace and fine linens. They never went out without being heavily veiled. No doubt Mary had high hopes that her lover would rescue her from this wilderness exile. No doubt Captain South's melody rang soft and true, "All my soul was turned to you . . . Do you think of one, who dearly, Dearly loves to think of you." When the long looked for tidings came from England, her faithless lover had married another. "A malady preyed upon her heart, that medicine could not reach." She either could not or would not accommodate herself to changed circumstances and make new friends in her

1. Cincinnati Dist., in Pleasant tp., S.W. $\frac{1}{4}$ sec. 19, T.3N., R.3W., 1st prin. mer., 168 acres, Dec. 26, 1817; Jeffersonville Dist., in Jefferson co., S.E. $\frac{1}{4}$ sec. 21, T.4N., R.12E., 2nd prin. mer., 160 acres, Jan. 19, 1819; Craig tp., fract. sec. 27, T.4N., R.12E., 476 acres, Jan. 25, 1819.

new home, yet she often played and sang for those who were music hungry and came to hear.

After five years of backwoods life, Mary received a legacy, from whom, we know not. The Switzerland County records show that on September 12, 1822, John Wright gave a mortgage deed on his property to his daughter, Mary Wright, spinster, for \$5,000 for money and effects received. He was to pay out in one year or pay legal interest until paid. The document was signed, and it was witnessed by Samuel Merrill and Edward Patton, justice of peace. On December 5, 1822 John Wright borrowed \$1,200 of his daughter, Mary Wright, and gave security, namely, all the tract of land being on the other side of Indian Creek, the northwest quarter of fractional section 27 range 12 east, purchased of Jeffersonville District, the 160 acres on which he lived. This was witnessed by William Carpenter and John Wright, Jr., before John Frances Dufour. Also, on December 5, 1822, he borrowed \$1,000 of Mary; as security he gave the stock, furniture, books, farm implements and household utensils that were in his possession on the tract of land he sold her this same day, excepting one cow and calf, two beds, one bake oven, two handirons, two gridirons, one carpet, six chairs, six knives and forks, one bread basket and one tea kettle. William Carpenter was the witness of this mortgage. Altogether, Mary loaned her father \$7,200, for which he mortgaged all he possessed. He told his friend Mr. Rous, at about this time, that he was at last free from his English debts. That he was never free from its humiliating burden, is shown in the records.

The second daughter, Sarah Wright, married a French widower, Justus Vairin, October 9, 1824. They moved to Owensboro, Kentucky, and had a family of six children, who eventually inherited the Wright estate.

John Wright died February 9, 1836. His sense of honor is shown in these mortgage deeds, made to his daughter. It is entirely possible that under the lax laws of those days regarding property rights, and under the existing circumstances, that he might have taken possession of the money without giving security.

When Mary brought suit to foreclose the mortgage, there was due her, principal and interest, \$9,350. In July, 1837, the

sheriff, Ralph B. Cotton, gave notice that this property would be sold at the courthouse door on August 17, 1837, by public outcry to the highest bidder. The sheriff's deed to Mary, August 18, for 476 acres, was in the sum of \$4,500. So Mary scarcely received half of the money value she originally loaned.

Mary, her mother, and John, Jr., who never married, continued their family life on the farm. To create a diversion, Mary began a series of concerts, an invitation to which was considered a social honor. The unusual musical program, the exquisite costume, the formal court manner, the stage effect of the Royal Theater, brought a thrill of London society at its best to the pioneers, who considered it a rare entertainment. Mary's room was in the half story, where she reached the door by climbing an outside ladder. There she dressed in her satin court dress and jewels, and when the neighbors arrived, the Rouses, the Cottons, the Baynes, Schaffars, Hutchinsons, and others, she appeared in the lower doorway, made a court bow, and seating herself at the piano, played her entire repertoire, of classical music, old English ballads, and reels. Then making another bow, after the manner of the Master Clementi's stage concerts, she went out, climbed up the ladder to her room, and the guests dispersed without adieu. For over forty years these concerts were repeated. Mr. Bayne, who is now over eighty years of age, is the only person living who attended these concerts in his youth. The piano was never tuned, nor did Mary Wright ever have a new page of music in all these years.

In 1851 her mother died. December 20, 1863, John, Jr., died. In about 1865 Sarah died in Kentucky, leaving Mary alone. The candle light of love in her heart was gradually snuffed out, until the bitterness of fate was greater than she could bear. She summed up her life in an epigram, which lived in the mind of a friend. She said, "I left high social position in England, to come to this place, where there is nothing but the grass under my feet, the trees around me and the blue sky overhead."

Perry Cotton was her business agent. No matter how urgent the business, she would not receive him without a previous engagement. Then dressed in her best costume, wearing a bonnet that concealed her features, she received him with the

formality due a foreign ambassador at the Court of King George III.

For years she only went out to wander by moonlight among the graves of her dead, and then for quite a while she kept to her room, being physically unable to descend the ladder; no steps to her room were ever made. The spirit's call, in the words of her old opera, "The Traveler," was "Death, Thou Art Welcome to me, Welcome now to me. For Hark! Hark! the glad trumpet sounds the victory." It was heard by our little court lady on April 21, 1875, when she was eighty-two years of age.

Her remains were lowered from her room by a rope. She was buried in the private cemetery in the "East Park" back of the house, now owned by Charles Wolf. Here each grave has a separate vault, built two and one-half feet above the ground, and filled with broken rock. Over all is a stone slab three inches thick. At the end of the vault wall is a white marble tablet bearing inscriptions. It is odd that even here in this holy quietness Mary's inscription should be seared and smoked, and the top stone broken by lightning, as though Nature too, had held a grudge. It was reported that the graveyard was haunted by a flickering light often seen there, and it was said Mary's spirit still walked by candle light among her dead, even as she walked while living. But after Mr. Wolf drained the swamp land, back of the graves, Mary's spirit at last rested in peace. After the death of Mary, Cecelia Vairin, her niece, came from Kentucky to take charge of the estate. She found it necessary to make a minute search of the house, as jewels, old English money, and solid silver service were hid between the logs; in old papers was found an oil portrait of an ancestor, while other valuables reposed in a trash barrel. While attending to this business, she visited with Perry Cotton's family; she gave the piano and music to Miss Bird Cotton, and English souvenirs to other members of that family.

When Mary Wright imitated the concerts of the great music master, Clementi, of London, to make a diversion in her banishment from musical companionship, her only thought was to give a little pleasure to those who lived around her. But while she filled the aching void of her soul, she all unknow-

ingly became the Genesis of Indiana music. Her tragedy is beautifully expressed in one of her old songs, "Words by Tho's Moore Esq. Sir J. S. Stevenson—Music Doc." "Fare thee well, yet think awhile, . . . Thou leav'st me many a bitter token, My peace is gone, my heart broken, Fare thee well."