"On the Banks of the Wabash": A Musical Whodunit

*Richard W. Dowell**

In 1940, when Lewis Gannett, New York *Herald Tribune* reviewer of William E. Wilson's *The Wabash,*[1] innocently repeated the author's assertion that Theodore Dreiser, not Paul Dresser, had written the first verse and chorus of Indiana's state song, "On the Banks of the Wabash,"[2] he unleashed a torrent of angry protests from Hoosiers and non-Hoosiers alike. Some suspected no more than a case of confusion or misspelling; others denounced the heresy as an affront to Indiana history. One Washington, D.C., reader fired a telegram to the *Herald Tribune,* asserting sarcastically that if Wilson's statement were true, Hoosiers would have to revise and restudy their history, and Terre Hauteans would have to rename their bridge. It seemed—as another irate reader confidently stated—that "everyone" knew that the composer was Paul Dresser, not his younger brother Theodore Dreiser, everyone except perhaps Wilson and the beleaguered reviewer.[3]

Caught without a ready reply, the *Herald Tribune* contacted Wilson's publisher, who in turn wired him. The return wire stated succinctly: "See Dreiser's 'My Brother Paul,' in *Twelve Men.*"[4] This was done, and Dreiser's claim to being the composer of the song's lyrics was reproduced in full for the skeptical *Herald Tribune* readers. The vindicated Gannett then concluded triumphantly with the suggestion that "Hoosier history and tradition, and some of the reference books do need revision."[5]

Such a revision, however, is more easily suggested than accomplished, for when one begins to look closely into the history of "On the Banks of the Wabash," the confusion is compounded. Even after the obviously apocryphal accounts are dismissed, many conflicting stories remain.

As previously noted, Dreiser in "My Brother Paul" from *Twelve Men* and later in the introduction to *The Songs of Paul Dresser*[6]

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[1] William E. Wilson, *The Wabash* (New York, 1940).

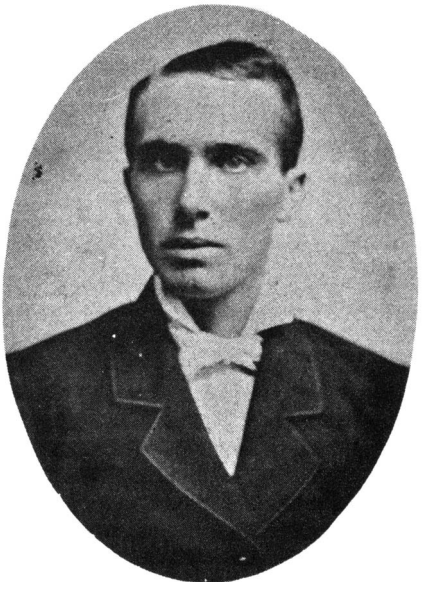
[2] "On the Banks of the Wabash" was published by Howley, Haviland & Company of New York in July, 1897, and dedicated to Mary E. South, a fourteen year old Terre Haute girl whom Dresser had never met. On March 14, 1913, it was adopted as Indiana's official state song. Indiana, *Laws* (1913), 693.

[3] Lewis Gannett, "Books and Things," New York *Herald Tribune,* February 25, 1940.

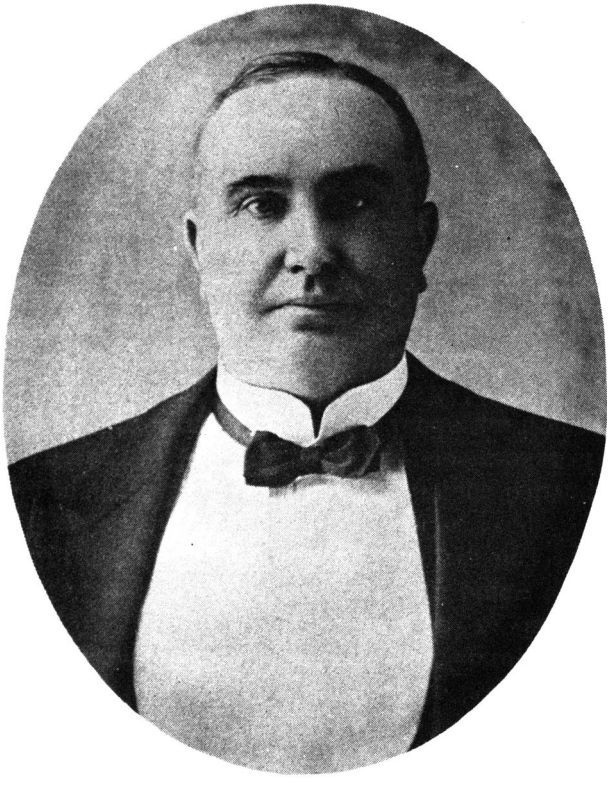
[4] Theodore Dreiser, "My Brother Paul," *Twelve Men* (New York, 1919), 76-101.

[5] Gannett, "Books and Things."

[6] Theodore Dreiser, "Concerning the Author of These Songs," *The Songs of Paul Dresser* (New York, 1927), viii-ix. This account appears to be primarily an



THEODORE DREISER
1894



PAUL DRESSER

Located in the Flanagan Manuscripts, Lilly Library, Indiana University. Courtesy Lilly Library.

claimed that the first verse and chorus were essentially his. As he recalled the situation in "My Brother Paul," the song was written on a Sunday morning in the summer of 1896.[7] At that time Dreiser was employed by Paul's publishing firm, Howley, Haviland & Company, to edit *Ev'ry Month*, a trade journal designed to plug their latest songs. The magazine normally contained some poetry, short fiction, feature articles, and a column of philosophical ramblings by Dreiser himself;[8] but its primary function was to display and circulate the sheet music of the firm's favorites.

According to Dreiser's version of the song's origin, he had gone to the office with Paul that Sunday to do some work. Once there, Paul began to pick meditatively at the piano.

" 'What do you suppose would make a good song these days?' " mused Paul. " 'Why don't you give me an idea for one once in a while, sport?' "

At first Dreiser responded somewhat sarcastically, but then, at Paul's urging, he began to take a condescending interest in the idea. " 'Why don't you write something about a State or a river?' " he finally asked. " 'Look at "My Old Kentucky Home," "Dixie," "Old Black Joe"—why don't you do something like that, something that suggests a part of America? People like that. Take Indiana—what's the matter with it—the Wabash River? It's as good as any other river, and you were "raised" beside it.' "

Paul, according to Dreiser's account, was immediately enthusiastic about the suggestion. " 'That's not a bad idea,' " he responded, " 'but how would you go about it? Why don't you write the words and let me put the music to them? We'll do it together!' "

As Dreiser continued his reminiscence,

> After a little urging . . . I took a piece of paper and after meditating a while scribbled in the most tentative manner imaginable the first verse and chorus of that song almost as it was published. I think one or two lines were too long or didn't rhyme, but eventually either he or I hammered them into shape, but before that I rather shamefacedly turned them over to him, for somehow I was convinced that this work was not for me and that I was rather loftily and cynically attempting what my good brother would do in all faith and feeling.
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> He read it, insisted that it was fine and that I should do a second verse, something with a story in it, a girl perhaps—a task which I solemnly rejected.
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> "No, you put it in. It's yours. I'm through."[9]

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editing of the account in "My Brother Paul." See also Theodore Dreiser, *A Hoosier Holiday* (New York, 1916), 350.

[7] Dreiser, "My Brother Paul," 99; Dreiser, "Concerning the Author of These Songs," viii. In "My Brother Paul" Dreiser parenthetically questioned the accuracy of this date; in "Concerning the Author of These Songs" he did not.

[8] No complete file of *Ev'ry Month* has been collected. The University of Pennsylvania has eleven issues, September, 1896-July, 1897, on film.

[9] Dreiser, "My Brother Paul," 100-101.

Some time later, according to Dreiser's account, he left Howley, Haviland & Company to become a free lance magazine feature writer and paid little attention to Paul and his affairs. Then, during the spring of 1897, he was roused from his bed one "warm, delicious" night by a quartette passing below his window. "I jumped up," he recalled. "They were my words! It was Paul's song! He had another 'hit' then—'On the Banks of the Wabash.' "[10]

For six years Dreiser watched the song become a national favorite and a huge commercial success while he sank gradually into poverty. At first his free lancing had proved profitable, but then *Sister Carrie* was branded immoral, making Dreiser an untouchable among the leading periodicals.[11] The final result was emotional collapse and financial disaster. In 1903, when Dreiser was at his lowest ebb, Paul reappeared, prosperous and amiable, as he so often did at times of crisis in the Dreiser family. Theodore tried to spurn him, as he had done five years before,[12] but this time Paul insisted on providing financial assistance: " 'I owe you half of "On the Banks," and you know it.' "[13] According to Dreiser's version, then, Paul fully acknowledged and tried to reward Theodore's contribution to the song's composition.

As Gannett of the *Herald Tribune* discovered, however, Dreiser's claim has not been widely accepted. Music historians typically mention it but ultimately conclude that words and music were by Dresser.[14] Likewise, Dreiser's authorship has not been popularly received by many Hoosiers, particularly Terre Hauteans, to whom Dresser's sentimental attachment to "the home place" has been more appealing than Dreiser's brooding cynicism and condescension.[15] In 1924, for example, Max Ehrmann, Terre Haute poet and scholar, wrote the official biography of Dresser for the Paul Dresser Memorial Association.[16] In preparation for this work, he visited Dreiser to collect facts

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[10] *Ibid.*, 101.

[11] Vrest Orton, *Dreiserana: A Book About His Books* (New York, 1929), 15-16.

[12] Dreiser narrates a meeting on Broadway between Paul and himself shortly after the publication of the song. At that time, Paul allegedly acknowledged his debt to Dreiser and offered a part of the royalties, but Dreiser spurned the offer. Dreiser, "My Brother Paul," 102.

[13] *Ibid.*, 104.

[14] See David Ewen, *American Popular Songs* (New York, 1966), 299-300; also Sigmund Spaeth, *A History of Popular Music in America* (New York, 1948), 276-78.

[15] As an example of Terre Haute's devotion to Paul Dresser, see Curt Bridwell, "Paul Dresser, City's Loved Singer, And Romantic Career," Terre Haute *Star*, February 25, 1940; also "Paul Dresser, the Singer, One of Terre Haute's Traditions," Terre Haute *Tribune*, January 30, 1939.

[16] Max Ehrmann, *Paul Dresser: Composer of "On the Banks of the Wabash"* ([Terre Haute], 1924). This sixteen page pamphlet (3"x6") was apparently part of a fund raising campaign for a Dresser Memorial. It is undocumented and tends to romanticize, doubtlessly perpetuating many of the inaccuracies about "On the Banks of the Wabash."

about Paul's life and came away disturbed by the novelist's lack of compassion for individuals. "I cannot conceive any personal devotion to Dreiser," he later wrote. "By appointment, we spent a few days together in Washington, where he gave me some material on his brother Paul of whose life I afterward wrote a sketch. He seemed ill, parched, neurotic, by turns timid and arrogant—a pitiable figure."[17] In the biography, Ehrmann refused to confirm Dreiser's claim to the lyrics. He accepted 1896 as the date and agreed that "On the Banks of the Wabash" had its genesis in the Howley, Haviland & Company office, but he remained quite noncommittal about Dreiser's specific contribution. Ehrmann recorded only that "There was some conversation between the two brothers; and Paul finally decided to write a river song, a Wabash River song, 'On the Banks of the Wabash.' . . . Together on this balmy summer Sunday morning they toyed with words, tender loving words of that river of Paul's childhood."[18]

Having thus evaded the question of the lyrics, Ehrmann shifted the emphasis to the time and location of the final composition of the music, which he placed at West Baden, Indiana, "some weeks later."[19] According to Ehrmann's rather romantic version, Dresser had been in poor health and was making his annual visit to West Baden Mineral Springs for rest and recreation. One evening in a mood of nostalgia, he wandered into the community theatre, walked down the dusky aisle, and took his seat at the piano. "And there in the deepening shadows of falling night, alone, and in the beloved state of his birth, his mind tender with memories of the river of his childhood, he beat out his soul upon the piano: he found his melody."[20]

This account is consistent with and perhaps stimulated by Dreiser's description of Paul's habits of composition. Dreiser in "My Brother Paul" recalled that his brother did not work rapidly or in flashes of inspiration; rather, he carried ideas for songs around with him,

> constantly attempting to work them out of himself, not quickly but slowly, brooding as it were over the piano wherever he might find one and could have a little solitude, at times on the organ (his favorite instrument), improvising various sad or wistful strains, some of which he jotted down, others of which, having mastered, he strove to fit words to. . . . He seemed to have a peculiar fondness for the twilight hour, and at this time might thrum over one strain and another until over some particular one, a new song usually, he would be in tears![21]

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[17] Bertha K. Ehrmann, *Max Ehrmann: A Poet's Life* (Boston, 1951), 38.
[18] Ehrmann, *Paul Dresser*, 11.
[19] *Ibid.*, 11-12.
[20] *Ibid.*
[21] Dreiser, "My Brother Paul," 96-97.

It should be noted that while this description supports Ehrmann's version of the song's composition, it tends to challenge Dreiser's own claim that "On the Banks of the Wabash" was completed, words and music, in a single sitting.[22]

Eventually Ehrmann's account was enlarged upon, and West Baden was honored not only as the site of composition but also as the place where "On the Banks of the Wabash" was first performed. A writer for the Terre Haute *Star* recorded in 1936 that Dresser, having just finished the music, taught the words to a Negro friend, George Hughes, who then introduced the song at a public concert in West Baden the following night.[23]

West Baden, however, is not the only Indiana health resort to claim the honor of being the site of the song's composition. Mudlavia Sanitarium, outside Attica, Indiana, another recreational area for Dresser in the 1890s, is also a candidate. Because of Dresser's frequent and sometimes extended visits to Mudlavia at the height of the song's popularity, the story has developed that he composed "On the Banks of the Wabash" on the sanitarium piano, which is currently housed in the Tippecanoe County Museum, Lafayette, Indiana, and designated as the instrument on which the state song was written.

Legend has also given Terre Haute a small share in the song's creation. The daughter of Jacob Breinig, conductor of the Terre Haute orchestra for forty years, told an interviewer in 1940 that she could remember Dresser's bringing the newly completed song to her father for orchestration. After Paul had hummed the melody, she recalled, her father wrote down the notes and then orchestrated it for a band.[24] She did not attempt to date this incident.

Quite a different version of the song's composition and orchestration has been left by Max Hoffman, orchestrator for Witmark's Publishing Company in the 1890s. Contradicting Dreiser's and Ehrmann's accounts, Hoffman claimed that the lyrics were written by Dresser in Chicago after the music had been composed. Hoffman, Paul's Chicago arranger at that time, recalled being summoned to the Auditorium Hotel one summer evening to help complete "On the Banks of the Wabash." During the course of that evening, he played the melody over and over on a folding camp organ, while Paul labored with the lyrics. As Hoffman narrated the incident:

"It was summer; all the windows were open and Paul was mulling over a melody that was practically in finished form. But he did not have the words. So he had

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[22] Theodore Dreiser, "The Birth and Growth of a Popular Song," *Metropolitan Magazine*, Vol. VIII (November, 1898), 498.

[23] Curt Bridwell, "Dresser Memorial Plans Recall Bard's Early Life," Terre Haute *Star*. October 27, 1936.

[24] "Recall Paul Dresser as Minstrel Show Star," Terre Haute *Star*, April 22, 1940.

me play the full chorus over and over again for at least two or three hours, while he was writing down words, changing a line here and a phrase there until at last the lyric suited him. He had a dummy refrain, which he was studying; but by the time he finished what he was writing down to my playing it was an altogether different lyric.

"When Paul came to the line 'Through the sycamores the candlelights were gleaming,' I was tremendously impressed. It struck me, at once, as one of the most poetic inspirations I had ever heard.

"I have always felt that Paul got the idea from glancing out of the window now and again as he wrote, and seeing the lights glimmering out on Lake Michigan. We spent many hours together that evening, and when Paul finished he asked me to make a piano part for publication at the earliest moment. I happened to have some music paper with me, and I wrote one right out, on the spot. This I mailed to Pat Howley, one of Dresser's partners, sending it to the New York office at Thirty-second Street and Broadway. At Paul's request I enclosed my bill.

"This piano part contained the lyric as Paul (and no one else) wrote it that night in my presence. The song was published precisely as I arranged it. They did not send proofs for me to read; the proofs were read in New York, to save time. During the whole evening we spent together, Paul made no mention of anyone's having helped him with the song."[25]

Typically, music historians have accepted Hoffman's account as the most reliable version.[26]

A further question surrounding the composition of "On the Banks of the Wabash" concerns the identity of "Mary" in the second verse, the one Dreiser did not claim. The lyrics of that verse are as follows:

> Many years have passed since I strolled by the river,
> Arm in arm with sweetheart Mary by my side.
> It was there I tried to tell her that I loved her,
> It was there I begged of her to be my bride.
> Long years have passed since I strolled thro' the churchyard,
> She's sleeping there, my angel Mary dear.
> I loved her but she thought I didn't mean it,
> Still I'd give my future were she only here.[27]

According to Vigo County historian Dorothy Clark, a local legend is that Dresser once courted a Terre Haute girl named Mary O'Brien. Her father, however, disapproved of Paul's ambition to become an actor and thus forbad the relationship; so Paul left Terre Haute to pursue his career. Soon after, in 1879, Mary died.[28] It is, of course, a tempting speculation that the song was recalling this blighted romance; however, Dresser chose to deny that such was the case. During a visit to Terre Haute in 1898, Dresser told a reporter that the

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[25] Isadore Witmark and Issac Goldberg, *Story of the House of Witmark: From Ragtime to Swingtime* (New York, 1939), 170-71.

[26] See, for example, David Ewen, *The Life and Death of Tin Pan Alley* (New York, 1964), 43-44; Ewen, *American Popular Songs*, 299-300; Spaeth, *A History of Popular Music in America*, 279.

[27] *The Songs of Paul Dresser*, 72.

[28] Conversation with Mrs. Dorothy Clark, Vigo County historian and curator of the Vigo County Museum, January 25, 1970.

second verse contained an allusion " 'to a mystical "Mary" but this personage was fictitious in the extreme at that time and was written "Mary" merely for rhythmical purposes.' "[29]

The "Mary" to whom the song was dedicated was Mary E. South, at that time a fourteen year old Terre Haute girl who had not met the composer. As Dresser told the story in 1898, his firm was in the process of printing copies of "On the Banks of the Wabash" when a visitor from Terre Haute, Dr. Thomas W. Moorhead, arrived at the New York office. After reading the new song to his guest, Paul asked, " 'Now, who in thunder is this unknown Mary to be to whom I have made allusion?' " For a few moments both men sat puffing on their cigars; then Moorhead suggested the dedication be to Miss South, who he claimed was both pretty and musically talented. Being already acquainted with the girl's father, Colonel Ellis E. South, Paul seized upon the idea and made the necessary arrangements.[30] A few days later, July 13, 1897, Dresser wrote Moorhead and enclosed some sheet music of "On the Banks of the Wabash" for Miss South.[31] She responded, expressing her appreciation and beginning a correspondence that lasted until Dresser's death in 1906.

The Mary E. South-Paul Dresser correspondence, much of which is the property of the Lilly Library at Indiana University, is a valuable aid in distinguishing fact from fiction, particularly in regard to Dreiser's claim to the lyrics. In one letter, for example, she asked specifically if Dresser had written the words as well as the music. Dresser answered: "As to whether I wrote the words to 'On the Banks of the Wabash,' I definitely did, as I do to all my songs and always have." He went on to say that Theodore had suggested the Wabash River as a subject, but the actual composition did not begin until Paul "was back in Indiana a month later."[32] This statement to Miss South is generally consistent with Paul's comments to the Terre Haute press in April, 1898, when he claimed that he was a one man song-writing outfit: "I write the words for all my songs, dictate the circumstances and stage settings for their public introductions, write my own ads, and sometimes sing my own songs. Now what do you think

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[29] "Talk with Dresser," Terre Haute *Tribune*, April 19, 1898.

[30] *Ibid.*

[31] Paul Dresser to Thomas W. Moorhead, July 13, 1897, Dresser Manuscripts (Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana). This letter is included in the Dresser-Mary E. South correspondence, most of which is the property of the Lilly Library. Miss South did not include some of the more personal letters; those have not been located since her death in November, 1968, and are presumed to have been destroyed.

[32] A taped interview between Mary E. South and Mrs. Anna Libbert, a Terre Haute elementary school teacher. Mrs. Libbert made the tape in June, 1963, for use in her classes; a copy is on file at the Wabash Valley Supplementary Education Center, Terre Haute, Indiana.

of that for a monopoly."[33] He went on to say in the interview that at Chicago in May of 1897 he had written "On the Banks of the Wabash" in an hour.[34] Apparently, Dresser never abandoned this position that he, and he alone, was the author of the song, for after Paul's death, fellow composer Charles K. Harris recalled Dresser's telling him that he had never succeeded in putting music to the lyrics of another, though he had tried on numerous occasions.[35] Paul's consistent refusal to acknowledge publicly any indebtedness poses a serious challenge to Dreiser's claim, for if Paul was as open and generous as all reports indicate, including "My Brother Paul,"[36] it is difficult to believe that he would deny his struggling younger brother the recognition he deserved and obviously needed.

Also adding to the doubts about Dreiser's collaboration is the fact that he apparently did not make a public claim to the lyrics until after Paul's death.[37] Dreiser wrote of the song's composition as early as 1898, when he did a feature article called the "Birth and Growth of a Popular Song" for *Metropolitan Magazine*. At this time, he noted that "On the Banks of the Wabash" was well on its way to selling over half a million copies and would bring its author thousands of dollars. For aspiring songwriters, he had the following encouragement:

> [Songwriting] looks easy, and the truth is, it really is easy for the person who has the popular-song vein in him. I know absolutely whereof I speak when I say that the words of "On the Banks of the Wabash" were written in less than an hour of an April Sunday afternoon, and that the music did not require a much longer period. The whole deed was pleasurable and easy, while the reward was proportionately great.[38]

It might be noted that "summer" in the later versions was "April" in this 1898 account and that "morning" was "afternoon." More significant, however, Dreiser in this early article made no reference to his personal participation and indicated no pique about his not sharing in the spoils—an amazing objectivity for a coauthor, particularly a coauthor who at that very time was struggling to save enough money to marry; and in view of Dreiser's later controversies with publishers

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[33] "Talk with Dresser."

[34] "Paul Dresser's Songs," Chicago *Record*. April 28, 1898.

[35] Mique O'Brien, "New York Papers Aid Dresser Memorial," Terre Haute *Tribune*, June 29, 1923.

[36] Dreiser wrote of Paul: "Some people are so successful, and yet you know their success is purely selfish—exclusive, not inclusive; they never permit you to share in their lives. Not so my good brother. He was generous to the point of self-destruction, and that is literally true." Dreiser, "My Brother Paul," 79.

[37] In a letter dated May 15, 1898, Dreiser boasted to his fiancee, Miss Sara Osborne White, that he was the composer of the song's lyrics: "Yes, dearie, I wrote the words as I said of On the Banks of the Wabash." Ellen Moers, *Two Dreisers* (New York, 1969), 95.

[38] Dreiser, "The Birth and Growth of a Popular Song," 498.

over royalties, such equanimity becomes more amazing.[39]

In 1909,[40] three years after Paul's death, Dreiser wrote "My Brother Paul," this time making the previously mentioned claim to being the author of the first verse and chorus. Many facts in this sketch, however, cannot bear close scrutiny. For example, Paul was thirteen years older than Theodore, not fifteen, as the sketch stated; Paul's death occurred on January 30, 1906, not in "late November"; and Paul was forty-seven when he died, not fifty-four.[41] More apropos to the composition of "On the Banks of the Wabash," Dreiser's placing the song's genesis on a summer Sunday morning in 1896 was also seemingly inaccurate. As noted above, his 1898 account placed the event on a Sunday afternoon in April, not a Sunday morning in summer, and since Paul indicated that the song was completed in May, one month after Dreiser's suggestion of the Wabash as a topic, April seems the logical choice. Also, the song was published in July, 1897, and Dreiser left Howley, Haviland & Company in September, 1897, not in the fall of 1896, as the sketch suggested. Thus, one can assume that 1897, not 1896, was the year of the song's birth. Finally, since the song was first popular in the fall of 1897, it is quite improbable that Dreiser heard it for the first time on a "warm, delicious" spring night.

As Dreiser was notoriously careless with dates and made no effort to conceal this fact, these inaccuracies should not surprise a reader nor perhaps greatly disturb him; however, there are more serious inconsistencies. Indeed, one part of Dreiser's account is so questionable that it creates some doubt as to the authenticity of the entire sketch. This question involves Dreiser's assertion that he first heard the song when he was roused from his bed by a quartette singing under his window some months after he left Howley, Haviland & Company. The fact is that Dreiser was still employed by that firm when the song was published in July, 1897, and would remain so for three more months, by which time "On the Banks of the Wabash" was well on its way to becoming a hit. Since the purpose of Dreiser's job as editor of *Ev'ry Month* was to plug the company's songs, it seems quite unlikely that he could remain ignorant of one of their most

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[39] Dreiser's throwing hot coffee in the face of publisher Horace Liveright during contractual talks over the movie rights to *An American Tragedy* was the most dramatic of the royalty disputes, but there were many. See, for example, W. A. Swanberg, *Dreiser* (New York, 1965), 160-64, 250, 305-308, 349-50.

[40] Robert Elias dates "My Brother Paul" in 1909, though *Twelve Men* was not published until 1919. *Theodore Dreiser: Apostle of Nature* (New York, 1949), 146.

[41] Dreiser, "My Brother Paul," 77, 108, 105. The date of Paul's birth is recorded as April 22, 1858, in the files of St. Joseph's Catholic Church, Terre Haute, Indiana; his death was reported to be January 30, 1906, by the New York *Herald*, January 31, 1906.

spectacular successes, particularly one that he had been personally involved in.[42]

In 1927, eighteen years after writing "My Brother Paul," Dreiser retold the story of his collaboration in the introduction to *The Songs of Paul Dresser.* As in the first telling, Dreiser insisted that he was the author of the first verse and chorus; however, one interesting revision was made. In this later version, he removed all mention of his cynicism and condescension toward Paul and the song. No longer did he include his responding "almost contemptuously" to Paul's plea for a suggestion, nor did he recall "loftily and cynically attempting" to write the words. Nostalgia was the keynote of the retelling, as if the years had wiped away the hostility Dreiser had felt toward his brother in the spring of 1897.

Such hostility, however, did exist. By April, 1897, Dreiser had become quite dissatisfied with his position in the firm. The aims and achievements of Paul and his associates seemed trivial and disgusting, always geared to the pedestrian tastes of the masses. W. A. Swanberg describes Dreiser's mood during the months in question as follows:

> He detested the hypocrisies of convention, the taste of the masses for sweet nothings, the one-track Howley-Haviland aim to sell more music. The firm regarded the magazine solely as a promotion for its songs, whereas he thought the songs trivial, gagged at much of the editorial material he was forced to print and yearned for freedom to print work he could respect.
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> . . . . . .
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> At times he was so angry at (or jealous of) Paul that he would scarcely speak to him.[43]

This antagonism between the two brothers was clearly illustrated in the April, 1897, issue of *Ev'ry Month,* the month in which the collaboration should logically have taken place. In this issue, Dreiser published a biting satire on Paul and other writers of musical comedy. This satire was written by Arthur Henry, a friend who shared Dreiser's contempt for the songwriting business and had been encouraging him to leave Howley, Haviland & Company.[44] Complete with a picture of Paul smashing up furniture on stage in a recent farce, the article lampooned such "delicate humor" and cynically advised writers of musical comedy to "Above all things avoid anything subtle. Your sarcasm must have teeth. Rapier thrusts at social or political conditions are lost. Use a club, and be sure and land on the

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[42] The August and September, 1897, issues of *Ev'ry Month* are not available among the Dreiser papers at the University of Pennsylvania.

[43] Swanberg, *Dreiser,* 73-74.

[44] *Ibid.,* 74.

old wounds."[45] Numerous pratfalls, an abundance of broken furniture, and a wealth of maudlin dialogue or songs, the satire concluded, were the sure keys to success. Clearly, this burlesque of Paul's techniques in his own trade magazine must have made the office a rather chilly spot during the spring of 1897—hardly a setting for nostalgic memories and thoughtful cooperation.

Thus, considering Paul's refusal to acknowledge Dreiser's aid with the lyrics, the suspicious delay and obvious inconsistencies and inaccuracies of Dreiser's accounts, the apparent hostilities in the spring of 1897, the alternate version left by Max Hoffman, and Dreiser's general tendency toward autobiographical fabrication,[46] one can perhaps conclude that Theodore's role in "On the Banks of the Wabash" was somewhat less than he eventually pictured it to be. All reports agree that he had some part in Paul's writing a Wabash River song; perhaps he even jotted down a few facetiously sentimental lines. But it is difficult to believe that Paul would publish those lyrics just as Theodore had written them and not give his own brother credit, particularly when that brother was still a member of the publishing firm, or that Dreiser would accept that slight with the equanimity indicated by the "Birth and Growth of a Popular Song" in 1898. It should also be noted that Dreiser's authorship remained unrecognized on Tin Pan Alley, for in 1923 composer Harris praised Paul Dresser as a "complete" songwriter:

> "Nobody ever tampered with his music or his lyrics. They couldn't. Nobody could touch any theme that was his. . . . He couldn't write a lyric to anybody else's music; neither could he set music to any other one's lyric, as he often told me. Because the combination would not fit, although he once said: 'I tried it several times, Charley.' "[47]

Had it been widely accepted that Dresser's most successful song was a product of collaboration, this compliment would hardly have been offered.

Concerning West Baden's part in the song's history, most evidence indicates that Dresser worked on the composition there in May, 1897, perhaps bringing the music near its final form. Paul was frequently in Chicago during these years to manage the branch office and usually took time out to relax at one of Indiana's health resorts.

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[45] Arthur Henry, "It Is to Laugh: A Little Talk on How to Write a Comic Opera," *Ev'ry Month*, III (April, 1897), 15.

[46] Dreiser's penchant for autobiographical fabrication is perhaps best illustrated in *Dawn* (New York, 1931). His sisters were furious at his exaggerated accounts of their sexual adventures; "Teddy," they insisted, "just invented all those fantastic stories." Swanberg, *Dreiser*, 375. Dreiser's brother Rome was also chagrined by the account of his own death, brought on, according to Dreiser, by a fit of alcoholism in a Clark Street flophouse. Dreiser, *A Hoosier Holiday*, 393. In actuality, Rome did not die until 1940.

[47] O'Brien, "New York Papers Aid Dresser Memorial."

It is totally consistent with his sentimental nature that one of these visits to his home state inspired him to resume work on the nostalgic ballad. Both Ehrmann and Mary South[48] agree that West Baden was the site, and there is no reliable evidence to challenge that claim. However, Hoffman's account and Dresser's own statement that the song was written in Chicago indicate that the words probably were not completed until later.

The claim that West Baden was also the scene of the song's inaugural performance is apparently untrue. As the South letters reveal, the performance on which that assertion was based did not take place until three months after the song's publication, when Paul was again relaxing at the baths. On November 1, 1897, Paul wrote Miss South, telling her of his return to West Baden. In this letter he said nothing about "On the Banks of the Wabash." Four days later he wrote again, this time referring to an entertainment that had taken place the previous evening. Two of Paul's songs, including "On the Banks of the Wabash," had been sung by a Negro waiter—apparently the George Hughes often mentioned in connection with this incident. Paul reported in the letter that the applause had been so enthusiastic that he had at last been forced to rise and speak. Addressing himself to the reference to "mother" in the first verse, the verse Dreiser claimed to have written, Paul defended himself against critics, such as Theodore, who looked upon his music as trivial and excessively sentimental. In the letter Dresser recalled the following comments: "While cynics might refer to the little simple melodies as trash & the words as maudlin sentiment, still to me with apologies to none, the grandes[t] word in English or any other language was Mother."[49] Since "On the Banks of the Wabash" had not yet won national acclaim,[50] many people in the audience that night were doubtless hearing it for the first time; thus, the story that the song was performed in West Baden the night after its completion easily evolved.

A more likely prospect is that "On the Banks of the Wabash" was first performed publicly at the Alhambra Theatre in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Harris, reminiscing about his association with Dresser, recalled being in attendance at the song's initial performance. Harris, whose headquarters were in Milwaukee at the time, said that Paul burst into his office excitedly one day and asked him to go hear "On the Banks of the Wabash" given a trial performance. As Harris related the details of the occasion,

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[48] South-Libbert taped interview.

[49] Paul Dresser to Mary E. South, November 5, 1897. Dresser Manuscripts.

[50] In a letter dated September 6, 1897, Dresser told Miss South that slightly better than five thousand copies had been sold, a good beginning but certainly not indicative of national popularity at that point. *Ibid.*

"I went down [his office was above the Alhambra Theatre] to the vaudeville show and sat beside him and heard the song for the first time it was ever sung. After the rendition he turned to me and said, 'Well, Charley, what do you think of it?' I said: 'Paul, you've got a sure-fire hit.' Tears welled in his eyes as he turned to me and said, 'Do you mean that, Charley?'

"I said: 'From the bottom of my heart I mean it.' I shook hands with him and we both went out to a telegraph office and he wired his firm: 'Wabash looks like big hit. Big applause. Get song out immediately.'"[51]

This account seems consistent with that above of arranger Hoffman, who recalled the song's being completed and arranged in Chicago and then mailed to New York ahead of Paul. Though Harris made no attempt to date this incident, Paul's statement that the song was written in May and the July publication date would logically place this performance in June, 1897.[52]

There is little concrete evidence to support Mudlavia's claim to a share in the song's history; however, the circumstances of Paul's visits there do indicate how such a claim might have arisen. As the South letters indicate, Paul was back in Indiana in April, 1898, to spend two weeks at the Mudlavia Sanitarium.[53] Since his last visit to Indiana "On the Banks of the Wabash" had become a national favorite selling thousands of copies a day.[54] Doubtless, it was a chief topic of conversation during his visit, and probably, being the genial person he apparently was, Dresser played the song frequently on the sanitarium piano now preserved in the Tippecanoe County Museum. Thus, for lack of evidence to the contrary, it can perhaps be assumed that Paul's lengthy stay at Mudlavia during the height of the new song's popularity gave rise over the years to the reports that the song was composed there.

The most reliable information, then, indicates that the history of "On the Banks of the Wabash" began in the office of Howley, Haviland & Company, probably on a Sunday in April, 1897. Dreiser suggested the topic, and the two brothers experimented with a tune and some lyrics, Dreiser cooperating in a facetious mood. Perhaps the "dummy refrain" that Hoffman remembered Paul's referring to in the Chicago hotel was Dreiser's; however, most evidence, including the three month period between April and the July publication, indi-

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[51] O'Brien, "New York Papers Aid Dresser Memorial."

[52] Harris was somewhat confused on the chronology of this incident. He recalled that Dresser was performing at Litt's Theatre in Milwaukee when the song was introduced at the Alhambra. Actually, Paul did not perform on the stage after the summer of 1896. Paul Dresser to Mary E. South, August 2, 1897. Dresser Manuscripts.

[53] During this stay at Mudlavia, Dresser wrote Miss South three letters: April 1, 7, 14, 1898. *Ibid.*

[54] Dreiser, "The Birth and Growth of a Popular Song," 497. Paul stated that his royalties from "On the Banks of the Wabash" were in excess of $50,000 by April, 1898. "Paul Dresser's Songs," Chicago *Record*, April 28, 1898.

cates that the song, both words and music, was still in embryonic form after that session, and would remain so for about a month. In the meantime, Paul made one of his frequent trips to the branch office in Chicago and then took a short vacation at West Baden, probably in May. There, amid Indiana surroundings, he resumed work on the song and brought the music to near its final form. The words apparently remained somewhat tentative. Then, he returned to Chicago and contacted Hoffman. Hoffman remembered that it was summer weather, and Paul dated the Chicago writing in May; so late May or early June would seem accurate. Together they worked out the rough spots, particularly in regard to the lyrics, Paul apparently revising so extensively that any facetious direction Dreiser might have given was inconsequential. Hoffman then arranged a piano part and mailed a copy to the main office in New York. Paul, however, remained in Chicago to set up a trial performance, ultimately deciding on the Alhambra Theatre in Milwaukee, logically in June. When the results proved encouraging, Paul wired his firm to proceed with publication and soon returned to New York himself. By July 13, 1897, all details had been worked out and the "professional copies" were coming from the presses when the visitor from Terre Haute arrived with the suggestion that Paul dedicate "On the Banks of the Wabash" to Miss South. During the ensuing year Paul made two triumphant trips back to Indiana, first to West Baden in November, 1897, and then to Mudlavia in April, 1898. On both occasions, the new song was doubtless performed and the composer lionized. Then, as the years passed and the popularity of "On the Banks of the Wabash" increased, memories began to fade; incidents began to telescope; those involved began to exaggerate their roles; and slowly facts gave way to legends.