

Harry LaForest Alford of MI and IL, 1879-1939

Submitted by Diane Holmes, AAFA #1081

This is the first of several articles that we will be doing on Harry L. Alford. He was the grandfather of Diane Holmes AAFA #1081 who was responsible for collecting most of the material and who did the computer input for us. Rather than risk repeating what is in this article or one of those that will be published in a future issue, we will refrain from saying more about Harry L. Alford here. You will want to read all of the articles about this very remarkable Alford. In a future segment we will include a genealogy on Harry L. Alford's branch of the family. - Editors

Harry L. Alford

by H. A. Vandercook

(Copied from *The Musical Messenger*, Vol. XVII, No. 3, Cincinnati, Ohio, March, 1921)

If, at the beginning, we knew precisely how much practice, work and worry we should have to go through before becoming proficient players upon a musical instrument, few, if any of us, would care to tackle the job. It is the same with the composers and arrangers of music. The average boy from the small town seldom hears enough of the finished product in either of these lines and little knows of the tremendous efforts that he will be required to make before he can really compete with the experienced musicians. He but dreams of one thing and that is success. This is all good, and as it should be. It also accounts largely for the successful men in many lines, who were originally from the country towns. The man, whom the world honors as a genius today, has passed through an extended period of doubt, longing and despair. He has discovered many things, and, among



Harry L. Alford, 1937

them the fact that no one fails he merely quits trying.

The career of Harry L. Alford, composer and arranger, now at the head of his profession, suggests the above paragraphs. He dreamed of success, and when Miss Opportunity tapped on his door it sounded to him like hitting a bass drum with a ball bat.

In Hudson, Michigan, one day (back in 1897), there came to this town, on its annual pilgrimage an excellent band,

that was featured with a show company. Alford had heard of this band and had heard it play before. He dreamed of this band playing one of his compositions and that is just where he made a good start. He dreamed and then acted. He composed and arranged as well as copied with exceeding care his then best effort a march. Approaching the leader of this band, in a faint, high tenor voice (and with much timidity) he mumbled over a speech which he had rehearsed by himself (and mostly forgot when he went to use it)

and tendered his favorite composition to this bandmaster for his approval.

What's this? asked the leader, sharply.

March, replied Alford, faintly. And who wrote and arranged it? I me.

Gee whiz, young feller--you copy a good hand. What do you want me to do with it?

Play it please, said Alford, gaining courage.

Sure thing I'll play it, said the bandmaster. Looks good. And he handed it out to his men.

Up the main street of the village went the band Alford tagging along. Did they play it? We'll say they did! Not once, but many times that day Alford always tagging along, always hearing and in sight of the leader. When the march was finally returned to Alford, the leader said:

Fine, young feller fine. You got some good ideas. They need development. Hear good music and go study.

Following this Alford wrote many other marches, waltzes, etc. He tried them on the dog the town band to learn how they'd sound. Much encouragement was given him by the local tinsmith, blacksmith and the shoemaker. By and by some of them told him he was good, as well as the best in the state. The last assertion did settle it and he immediately wanted to see how he stood in the adjoining states. In this he was greatly discouraged by the shoemaker, who said to him;

You'd better stay home. Don't git to roamin' around the country. A rolling stone gathers no moss. Alford retaliated with the reply that he didn't want to be covered with moss anyway. That some of the people here have moss on their backs a couple of inches long, and I can't see that it improves their intellect any.

So he took his trombone under his arm and hied himself to Toledo. His first job was subbing for the regular trombone player in a theatre, Della Fox was the star, the music went swift, and Alford wasn't experienced in that kind of work. He managed to get through the first act though it was a nervous nightmare to him. In the second act of the comedy there was a scene where a man was supposed to have his head chopped off. Right here was a short crash a *discord* for the orchestra. Alford hit it but it hurt his ears. It didn't exactly jibe for some reason or other, so he took his pencil and tried to write in an interval on the trombone part that would chord with the others. When he sat in for the night shows, and just before this crash was to occur again, the leader leaned over toward him and whispered, All right, Mr. Trombone, look out for that discord. Whispering back Alford said: All right what key is it in? This only goes to show that his acute ear demanded something besides discords, even that early in the game.

Right at this time in his career he made his best move. He went to the Dana Music School, at Warren, Ohio. Here is where he learned the why and wherefores of harmony as well as to compose and arrange with intelligence. Previous to this he had been arranging his way, because it sounded good to do so. When he had learned the grammar of music he had ascended several rungs up the ladder towards success.

Then he went to Chicago with his trombone (and little else). He had a dream that he would, some day, establish an arranging bureau, where he could offer for sale some of the knowledge he had gained. Most of the arranging of music in Chicago in those days was done by some old musician in a dusty attic room, or the house leader when he had time to do it. Alford was met with the pleasant prospect and advice from some of those

men, who said: Oh, you are an arranger, eh? You'll do well here-not! Why, man, you'll starve to death at that game." Alford had no more faith in this assertion than he had in the old town shoemaker's advice about gathering moss. He played some jobs on the trombone, skating rinks, dances, etc., and made all the arrangements he could get hold of. Sometimes he was paid well for his work, sometimes not at all. Did he stick? You know he did. And it wasn't long before his clever arrangements came to be recognized.

Of course, you young fellows know (or you ought to), that, Anything you have a real desire to do, you have the capacity to do. Believe that, act upon your belief, and there is nothing you aspire to within your individual talents that you can not become. This was Alford's system, and it should be a soul tonic for any struggling young fellow, provided he uses the prescription sanely.

Businessmen and the public in general seldom (if ever) give a thought to the arranger of music. They hear a number rendered, it sounds good. They let it go at that. The average composer of popular music and popular songs as a rule pokes out the tune with one finger on a piano, jots the melody down after a fashion and immediately runs to the good arranger with it, to get the said arranger to put it in the proper form, so that it will sound well and become commercially valuable. If the arranger happens to have his name stuck off in a corner, somewhere (in parentheses), he's in luck. They usually forget the arranger altogether while telling how talented the composer is. The fact of the matter is that the arranger is responsible for nearly all of the successes, and usually none of the failures that a composition meets with. He occupies the same position in music that the milliner, designer and dressmaker occupy with the garments of the gentler sex. Much depends in each case on how they are dressed. And this

man, Harry Alford, is one of those arrangers who can take an insipid, weak and meaningless melody and dress it up by changing an interval here and there and accompanying the whole with a progression of chords that the average arranger would overlook. Once he has the job finished, you may rest assured it is well done.

It is an interesting visit to one who enters the splendid suite of rooms in the big theater building that Harry Alford now occupies. Here are the outer offices, the Information desk, the parlors and the sound-proof room. Then Alford's private office and at last the big, air, light copying room where they are seated, busily at work at rows of desks, an able and schooled body of arrangers and copyists. To these offices come the people from the concert halls, opera, chautauquas, vaudeville and movie houses, as well as the composer, to have their arrangements made. Everybody seems to know Alford. Everybody seems to call him Harry. In comes a team from one of the vaudeville houses. One of them calls for Harry, and getting his attention, the performer will sing the usual vaudeville words in Harry's ears; *Dome dome, domeity, dome*, Alford understands. The man has a new tune running in his mind and wants it arranged for his act. Inviting him into the sound-proof room, where the piano is situated, Alford seats himself, hears the artist hum over the melody, and takes this tune down from the voice as rapidly as the court reporter will write in shorthand. Using great diplomacy here and there, Alford will rub out this and change that, and soon will make a presentable melody of a mere nothing. Can I have that arranged by five o'clock, Harry? he asks of Alford, Sure, says Harry, and he will make one of his famous

shorthand scores of it all, hand it to the foreman of the copying room, and it's done on time.

In comes a man with a phonograph record under his arm. Harry, put this on your phonograph and run over. There's a melody along in the middle of it, I want a copy for the act & There, that's the beginning of it, see? Harry listens, grabs a piece of music paper and a pencil, takes it down precisely and quickly as it is given on the record and says: Now, let's see that the key is best for you & No-o-o. Sing it higher, so you can get it over & There, that's it. Key of A-flat. All right, you can have the arrangement at four o'clock this afternoon. Then he makes the shorthand score, slips it to the head copyist, and, there they are; all ready at four o'clock. The real estate man, with offices on the same floor, goes to the theatre with his wife that night and hears a wonderful arrangement played by the house orchestra. If you would tell this businessman that Alford, the man across the hall, arranged that, the changes are that he wouldn't know what you were talking about. He doesn't even know that music has to be arranged. But, much of his pleasures in life would be curtailed without such men as Alford on the job. It is much like the first-class cabin passenger enjoying his sea trip without giving a passing thought to the coal stoker" in the hold. The ship moves on, and the passenger takes everything for granted.

To some men the satisfaction of doing something well is greater to them than the glory of great publicity. This man Alford can slip unobserved into almost any theatre in America, slide away down in his seat with his knees on the back of the seat ahead, and be sure that somewhere in the musical part of the program he is going to hear several of his arrangements. In this, he takes his

pleasure. His name may be in parentheses, somewhere, on the music, or it may be left off altogether. But, he made it and when he hears it he knows he made it well. More power to him.

Personally, Alford is of medium height and build, quick, nervous, full of pep and speaks rapidly, in a high, tenor voice. If he ever had a hobby outside of his love for concord of sweet sounds, no one has discovered it. His success should be a shining light for young musicians to steer by. Remember his definition of a failure: A man who quits trying.

A

CD Available

The AAFA Store has a CD prepared by the Paragon Ragtime Orchestra directed by Dr. Rick Benjamin which contains three compositions of Harry L. Alford: *Glances, Drumology, and Lucy's Sextette: A Ragtime Travesty on Donizetti*; six of Harry L. Alford's arrangements: *Knockout Drops: A Trombone Jag, The Kansas City Blues, Stop It!, I Ain't Got Nobody & the Neutrality Rag, Scott Joplin's New Rag, Meet Me Tonight in Dreamland*; and one on which he was a co-arranger: *Alkali Ike Rag: A North Dakota Misunderstanding*. Order the CD, called **KNOCKOUT DROPS, from the AAFA store. Send check for \$12 to the treasurer.**