Paul Dresser

Essay By Clayton W. Henderson

"On the Banks of the Wabash, Far Away"

Verse 1

Round my Indiana homestead wave the cornfields,
In the distance loom the woodlands clear and cool.
Oftentimes my thoughts revert to scenes of childhood,
Where I first received my lessons, nature's school.
But one thing there is missing in the picture,
Without her face it seems so incomplete.
I long to see my mother in the doorway,
As she stood there years ago, her boy to greet!

Verse 2

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.

Chorus

Oh, the moonlight's fair tonight along the Wabash,
From the fields there comes the breath of new mown hay.
Thro' the sycamores the candle lights are gleaming,
On the banks of the Wabash, far away.

At a time when some have urged the Indiana legislature to adopt an official insect, few Hoosiers may know that the state song is the oldest of Indiana's official emblems, appropriated eighty-four years ago on 14 March 1913 by the Sixty-eighth General Assembly. Fewer still are probably aware that 1997 marks the centennial of Paul Dresser's composition of that song, "On the Banks of the Wabash, Far Away." In the century that has passed since Dresser wrote it, both the song and the composer have fallen from the ranks of celebrity to relative obscurity. The paths of both have been as slippery as some of the slopes along Indiana's famous river.

Born in Terre Haute on 22 April 1858 as Johann Paul Dreiser Jr., Dresser possessed, by his own account, a natural poetic and musical temperament that conflicted with his father's plans for his son to become a priest. Sent by his father to St. Meinrad's seminary in the early 1870s, Paul decided, after staying there only about two years, that the priesthood was not for him. He returned to a father who, by many accounts, was unreasonably demanding; to an all-forgiving and controlling mother -- a woman he repeatedly celebrated in song and always revered; to a family that bore the stigma of being poor; to what he undoubtedly saw as a humdrum life.

Restless for excitement, he took up with some of the local "swells," got into trouble with the law more than once, was arrested, and spent time in jail. Shortly afterward, Paul left to follow the exciting life of singer and composer for Chicago's Hamlin Wizard Oil Company. Changing his last name to Dresser, he composed a Paul Dresser Songster for Hamlin, singing some of his compositions as part of a male quartet that toured with the medicine wagon.

With their instrumental music, songs, jokes, and magic tricks, Dresser and his cohorts, dressed in silk top hats, spats, and formal wear, amused the crowds that gathered to see and hear the colorful and exciting Hamlin troupe as it traveled by gaudily decorated horse-drawn wagons to villages and towns in Ohio, Illinois, and Indiana. The troupe's entertainment softened the townspeople for the sales pitch in which the barker, in his resplendent white tie and tails, extolled the virtues of the patent medicines and other Hamlin remedies that people could buy on the spot or purchase at the local apothecary.

Paul's work with Hamlin Wizard Oil led to engagements with blackface minstrel companies, and by the age of only twenty-two he had earned such a reputation as an entertainer that he was a featured performer -- "The Favorite Paul Dresser! Comic Songs" -- at a benefit concert held in Chicago's Grand Opera House to honor Dan Emmett, the composer of "Dixie." By 1895 Dresser had established, and retired from, a successful career as a minstrel end-man, comedian, actor, singer, and all-around entertainer, a life that took him throughout the eastern United States and the Middle West from late in the 1870s until 1895.

Having gained some experience as a songwriter for Hamlin and for minstrel shows, Dresser continued to compose during the peak of his performing career, turning out nearly fifty songs between 1886 and 1893. "The Letter That Never Came" (1886), "I Believe It For My Mother Told Me So" (1887), and "The Pardon That Came Too Late" (1891) all brought him some success and probably convinced Paul that his future lay in composing rather than performing. If nothing else, he realized from the pittance he made from his songs that being just the composer was not the way to earn the increasingly large amounts of money that successful songs made. True financial success came to the publisher; being the composer as well just added to the rewards. In 1894 Dresser became a silent partner of Pat Howley and Fred Haviland in a music publishing firm they established in a third-floor room on Twentieth Street, between Fifth Avenue and Broadway in New York City. In a short time, Howley, Haviland became one of the major publishers of "hit" songs.

The "hit" was a relatively new phenomenon in American popular culture, dating from only a decade or so before Dresser began his run of immensely successful music, but it soon became an overriding force in music publishing. From 1895 when Paul wrote "Just Tell Them That You Saw Me" (inspired by the response of a down-and-out actor who was asked by Dresser if the man wanted to send a message to his people back home in Terre Haute) until shortly after the turn of the century, Paul Dresser consistently wrote hit songs that brought him and Howley, Haviland great financial reward.

His successes during those years included the mother-and-home songs "A Dream of My Boyhood's Days," "On the Banks of the Wabash, Far Away," "Every Night There's a Light, "The Path That Leads the Other Way," "I Wonder Where She Is Tonight," "Calling to Her Boy Just Once Again," and "I Just Want to Go Back and Start the Whole Thing Over." Capitalizing on the Spanish-American War, which united many former Civil War enemies under one flag, Dresser wrote the popular successes "We Are Coming, Cuba, Coming," "Your God Comes First, Your Country Next, Then Mother Dear," "Come Home, Dewey, We Won't Do a Thing to You," "The Blue and the Gray," "Give Us Just Another Lincoln," and "Wrap Me in the Stars and Stripes." By 1901 Paul's obvious importance and value to Howley, Haviland were reflected in the company's new name -- Howley, Haviland and Dresser, with offices in New York, Chicago, and San Francisco, and with representation in Toronto and London.

The success and growth for both Dresser and his firm, however, were relatively brief, for Paul's sentimental songs fell out of favor; they were rapidly replaced in the public's affection by songs whose words reflected shifts in social mores and urban life, current streetwise expressions, and a fascination with turn-of-the-century technology, and whose music expressed the exuberant rhythms of the new absorption: ragtime. In 1903 Dresser and Howley bought out Haviland and created the Howley-Dresser Company, a short-lived venture which bankruptcy dissolved scarcely more than a year later. Understanding neither his shortcomings as a businessman nor the fact that his once-adoring public now considered his style of music old-fashioned, Dresser next established the Paul Dresser Company with money he borrowed from his youngest brother, Ed. This enterprise had no better fortune than that of Howley-Dresser.

Dresser's slide to failure, seen in retrospect, seems to have been inevitable. His lack of business acumen, coupled with a generous nature that led him to give away most of his money and his inability or unwillingness to change his musical style, brought Paul Dresser, once the talk of Broadway, one of the most celebrated of all song composers, to poverty. He moved into a sister's home only a short distance from the scenes of his musical triumphs. There he died penniless on 30 January 1906. At his funeral, family, musicians, including "more than a hundred well-known vaudeville performers and singers," representatives of Tin Pan Alley's publishing houses, friends, and the merely curious gathered inside the Church of St. Francis Xavier at Sixteenth Street and Sixth Avenue to say farewell to "the greatest of American popular song writers," as his obituary in the New York Daily News called him.

"On the Banks of the Wabash, Far Away" had brought Dresser the kind of acclaim, financial reward, and reputation that few popular-song composers before him had ever enjoyed. When asked what led him to compose "Wabash," Dresser responded, "The same sweet memory that inspired that other Hoosier, James Whitcomb Riley, to sing of the 'Old Swimmin' Hole'" [inspired me to write the song]. "I was born on the banks of the Wabash at Terre Haute. . . . My fondest recollections are of my mother and of my early days along this stream." The song rapidly became a sensation; the Chicago Record reported that on a single day one department store sold 1,471 copies of the song and that "Wabash" "has reached the most enormous sale of any popular song. Its author has received already from $30,000 to $50,000 in royalties upon his production which has given the Wabash a place in the world of song like that given the Swanee river by Stephen Foster's 'Down on the Swanee River.'"

Given the continued popularity of "Swanee River" (the alternate title of "Old Folks at Home"), it was inevitable that many writers compared "Wabash" to Foster's hymn to a river. On 5 August 1897, only three weeks after "professional" copies (advance samples printed on cheap newsprint) were sent out, a writer for a newspaper in Lagrange, Indiana, stated, "Mr. Dresser . . . has endeavored to perpetuate the beauties of the Wabash as did Stephen Foster that of the Suwannee River, and certainly no song since the latter has awakened so much interest among lovers of a good song, nor has any other American author seemed as capable of filling the void left vacant by Foster. The song is a gem and a welcome relief from some of the so-called popular songs sprung on the public from time to time."

Within a year Dresser reported that "Wabash" had broken all sales records and that the million mark would soon be passed, adding,

I can't tell you just how much I have cleared off of the song, but the $50,000 estimate I have seen in some papers is very modest. You see I am a publisher as well as a composer and have a big printing house of my own in New York. I also 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 of that for a monopoly. Eh?

The magnetism of Indiana, the enthralling memories of the halcyon days of boyhood, and his love for mythic mother constitute dominant motives in Dresser's songs and in letters he wrote to special friends from his childhood days. The words of "Wabash" captured for Paul and the nation the bittersweetness of place and time, a beloved river, locale, and youth.

To enhance these sentiments, Dresser created a memorable tune that nearly anyone can hum, whistle, or sing. Superior melodies possess a magical combination of repetition and contrast; the first helps one to easily remember the tune while the second offers a foil to ward off the possibility of monotony. Recurrence and dissimilarity work hand in hand in the best songs to create music that somehow seems delightfully fresh at each hearing. While composers of popular songs in the last half of the nineteenth

century commonly brought back to the refrain a melody they had already used in the verse, Dresser avoided this in "Wabash." The melody that ties the verse together and the tune that unifies the chorus are different from one another, but the whole works. Melody and words possess an unexplainable spellbinding logic all their own as they flow, like the river itself, unimpeded and inexorably from the verse to the end of the chorus.

This retrospective analysis suggests a process in which spontaneity has little or no place. It is unlikely that Dresser, untutored in the theory of music, went through such a laborious and calculated process when he composed. His younger brother Theodore Dreiser remarked that, unlike the extroverted Paul who constantly needed people around him in his role as performer, Paul the composer tended to be a solitary, slow composer, preferring the twilight hours to do his work. He refined a song by playing a tune over and over, changing it here, altering the contour there, getting it into his fingers and voice, brooding about it, worrying over it, committing some of it to paper, and at long last, when he had the tune to his satisfaction, often dissolving in tears over its sad and wistful qualities.

The result in Dresser's finest songs is a wedding of words and music in which nothing seems contrived, where the tune has a naturalness to it, the words telling a mesmerizing story in serial fashion, and the whole suggesting a contradictory combination of simplicity and elegance. Writing about a formula and putting that scheme into practice to create an unforgettable song are two different matters. The list of composers who succeed in accomplishing the latter is short; Dresser, at his best, belongs to that select group.

There are many anecdotes about "Wabash" and its use, but a few examples will suffice to show how popular it was from the days shortly after Dresser composed it until well into the first half of the twentieth century. The most famous of America's popular entertainers around the turn of the century included the song in their routines in music halls and on vaudeville stages; male quartets, that popular vocal combination of the same day, sang it repeatedly as a regular part of their programs; organ grinders-some out of personal conviction, more because they were on the payroll of publishers to plug new songs-wheezed out its lilting melody on their instruments on street corners; restaurant orchestras featured it as part of their repertoire; people hummed it on streetcars, played and sang it in the parlors of countless homes, and whistled it.

The New York World reported about an event that temporarily overshadowed the prizefight between Terry McGovern and Tommy White at Coney Island in June 1900. When a lighting failure pitched the arena into total darkness and few knew the location of the exits, Frank Conlin quieted the panicking crowd of five thousand by whistling, in a penetrating sound that carried throughout the space, a tune known to nearly all who were there. After officials repaired the lights, the boxing match continued, but not until McGovern acknowledged Conlin's efforts as the crowd roared its appreciation. The tune Conlin whistled? "On the Banks of the Wabash, Far Away."

Dresser remarked that he had received letters from all over the world about the song, including one from a Catholic priest who had written from aboard a ship off the Australian coast. The traveling priest told Dresser that he had heard "Wabash" being sung and played as a regular part of the musical program in a hotel in Yokohama, Japan, and had seen the song for sale in every place he had visited.

The New York Times reported in 1925 that twenty thousand copies of "Wabash" had been distributed to Indiana school teachers. It was listed as one of the songs required to be taught to these teachers, and the song had been reprinted in the Indiana State Normal School catalog of which thirty thousand copies had been sent out.

A member of the committee that was considering a fitting monument to the composer in the 1920s remarked ecstatically that Dresser's song had taken on the wings of immortality and filled all loyal Hoosier hearts "with the most poignant homesickness and longings for Riley's green fields and running brooks-Aunt Mary at the door, the frost on the punkin and the fodder in the shock! The Wabash is everywhere identified with the state name; it is a part of American history." Recognizing its practical value as well, the member saw the song as a "great advertisement of the state."

The Terre Haute Tribune remarked on 13 June 1923 that Indiana Governor Warren T. McCray's forthcoming proclamation confirming that a Paul Dresser memorial was to be erected in Terre Haute would be published "in every leading paper in the country and a country-wide demonstration will be held on that day including the singing of 'On the Banks of the Wabash, Far Away.'" A year later the Paul Dresser Memorial Association scheduled a national appeal to raise money for a Dresser memorial, a solicitation that would be made during the Indiana observance of State Song fortnight.

The precise genesis of the composition of "Wabash" has been lost but we do know that Dresser worked on the song between late spring and early summer of 1897, and that Howley, Haviland published "professional" copies of it in mid-July and regular copies for the general public a short time later. Dresser and others gave conflicting accounts about how, where, and under what circumstances he wrote the song. The Mudlavia health spa, West Baden Springs, Paul's office at Howley, Haviland, and his room in Chicago all have shared the honor, at one time or another, of being the place where Dresser wrote "Wabash." He probably did work on the song in many locations, refining and auditioning it before Howley, Haviland issued the advance copies.

In early 1898, less than seven months after the publishers issued the song, Theodore Dreiser wrote to his fiancée that he had written the words to "Wabash," was pleased the song had become Paul's newest hit, but not to say anything about this confession. Aside from this letter to Sara Osborne White, Theodore made neither an artistic nor financial claim to his "share" of "Wabash" before Paul's death, even after the turn of the century when his Sister Carrie had failed and he was nearly destitute and desperate for a job, a time when "Wabash" was still bringing in large royalties to Paul and to Howley, Haviland.

In 1909, when he wrote "My Brother Paul" (published a decade later as part of his book Twelve Men), Dreiser remembered that "one . . . delightful summer Sunday (1896, I believe)" Paul asked him to give him an idea for a song. Responding, Theodore suggested that his brother write something with an American theme: "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." At Paul's continued urging, Theodore said he "scribbled in the most tentative manner imaginable the first verse and chorus of that song almost as it was published," but left the second verse for Paul to write. Theodore repeated this contention in 1916 in A Hoosier Holiday and in 1927 in "Concerning the Author of These Songs," his introduction to an edition of fifty-seven of Paul's songs.

Several years later, Dreiser's assertions resurfaced. In Lewis Gannett of the New York Herald Tribune reviewed William E. Wilson's book, The Wabash, in which the author repeated Dreiser's claim of having written the words to the first verse and chorus of Indiana's state song. Hoosiers rallied to Paul's side and railed against Dreiser who then expended much time and energy defending himself, never denying his declaration but trying desperately to play down the significance of his asserted collaboration. "No rhymed verses on any topic ever made a song," Dreiser once remarked. "The song [i.e., "Wabash"] is the singer -- his music [i.e., Paul's] -- not the words alone, ever. If so, 'Swanee River' would be famous today without the music. So would 'Annie Laurie.' So would 'On The Sidewalks of New York.'"

Partly because of his frequent acerbic comments about his native state, many Indianans never felt for Dreiser the kind of affection with which they had embraced Paul -- that warm, funny, local-boy-who-had-made-good, the boy who had loved his Wabash River, his state, and the place of his birth. Now his claim to partial authorship of the Indiana state song only made matters worse for Dreiser. People had good reason to doubt Dreiser's veracity, for when reporters had asked Paul about his method of composing, he unfailingly told them that he always wrote his own words and at no time did he ever acknowledge collaborating with his brother.

Theodore had a special interest in stilling this uproar. At that time he was discussing a proposed film biography of Paul with Hollywood movie studios and certainly would not have wanted his own notoriety to overshadow or diminish the importance of his brother. The movie, in spite of a number of problems, came to fruition in 1942 as My Gal Sal, starring Victor Mature as Dresser. In connection with the early negotiations and plans for the film, Dreiser promoted a Paul Dresser Day, to be held throughout America on 22 April 1940-Paul's eighty-second birthday. Dreiser intended the tribute to focus attention on Paul, giving him the kind of exposure that would return him to national recognition, now three and a half decades after his death; a successful Paul Dresser Day would help guarantee the film. Dreiser's efforts succeeded except in Terre Haute, where the city of Paul's birth was "content to listen as [the] nation honors Paul Dresser."

By 1940 a considerable degree of enmity existed between Dreiser and some Terre Hauteans, the latter offended by what they perceived as the novelist's rank and unwelcome interference in the deliberations of the Paul Dresser Memorial Association in

the 1920s, by what they saw as the gratuitous swipes Dreiser had taken at Indiana in A Hoosier Holiday, and by his novels that some saw as being too risqué, if not downright obscene. For these people, the crowning blow, the unforgiveable sin, was Theodore's claim to some of "Wabash." The collective antipathy toward Paul's younger brother, accumulated over more than two decades, was enough to convince the city to snub Dreiser's plans to honor the composer of the state song.

As if planning for Paul Dresser Day and negotiations for a film biography were not enough to keep him busy, Dreiser also had to deal with a different sort of problem. Remember the Night, a 1940 movie starring Barbara Stanwyck and Fred MacMurray, included in its musical score "(Back Home Again in) Indiana," a song Dreiser viewed as a plagiarism of "Wabash."

Written in 1917 with music by Indiana-born James Hanley to words by Ballard MacDonald, the song borrows shamelessly from Dresser. In the refrain to "Wabash," where Paul wrote "Thro' the sycamores the candle lights are gleaming," MacDonald penned "The gleaming candlelight still shining bright thru the sycamores"; Dresser's "Oh, the moonlight's fair tonight along the Wabash" became "When I dream about the moonlight on the Wabash"; and Dresser's "From the fields there comes the breath of new mown hay" was changed to "The new mown hay sends all its fragrance." Hanley took the melody from those measures of Paul's song where the words "Thro' the sycamores the candle lights are gleaming, On the banks" appear and, with but the change of a single note, took all of that tune to fit MacDonald's words "When I dream about the moonlight on the Wabash."

By using note values of long, followed by short, durations throughout his song -- precisely those note lengths that pervade Dresser's songs -- Hanley simulated the entire musical mood of "Wabash." The complicated state of Paul's business affairs, including numerous questions about copyright ownership of his songs, and Dreiser's own developing career didn't leave the author a great deal of time, as his brother's executor, to deal with all the intricacies of Paul's estate; thus he was probably unaware until 1940 that others had expropriated some music and words from "Wabash" for their own use.

Perhaps feeling that the popularity of "Indiana" might overshadow Paul's state song, possibly temper the recognition Dreiser hoped the movie My Gal Sal would bring his brother, and, if he had really collaborated in the creation of "Wabash," be a blow to his artistic pride, Dreiser pursued the issue of copyright violation with the Paull-Pioneer Music Corporation, then the owners of the copyright to "Wabash." The president of Paull-Pioneer informed Dreiser that the Maurice Richmond Music Company, owners of the copyright to "Wabash" in 1917, had granted permission to Hanley and MacDonald to use two bars of music from "Wabash" with some change in the lyrics. Not content with this explanation, Dreiser continued to make his case for plagiarism but to no avail.

While Dresser's state song was sung at all sorts of gatherings in Indiana well into the 1940s, "Indiana" has gradually replaced "Wabash" in the minds, hearts, and ears of many younger Hoosiers. Indeed, many people-Hoosier and non-Indianan alike-

mistakenly believe that Hanley's is the state song and have never heard "Wabash." While Stephen Foster's "My Old Kentucky Home" is sung before the running of the Kentucky Derby, identified as the state song by those gathered there and by others who watch the event on television, the Indianapolis 500 race, which represents and identifies Indiana to many outsiders, features the singing of "Indiana," rather than the state song.

Today one only rarely hears "On the Banks of the Wabash, Far Away," composed by the man many consider to be the only true successor to Foster in the writing of sentimental home songs. Based on musical merits alone, it is difficult to know why Foster's song has endured while Dresser's has largely been forgotten. With their bittersweet memories of the past in words colored by the halcyon days of youth, both represent the grand tradition of the sentimental song. The music of each, relatively simple, speaks directly to the heart and possesses that ineffable magic that makes for a superior song.

It is also puzzling why "Indiana" has supplanted "Wabash" as the favorite song about Indiana. Hanley's song, as it is usually performed, has a jauntiness, a sprightliness that gives it a certain appeal to the ear, but "Wabash" possesses that same buoyant quality when it is sung at a tempo slightly faster than is customary today, but one at which it was often sung at the turn of the century. Perhaps without realizing it, some do hear "On the Banks of the Wabash, Far Away" as it is imbedded in its shadow twin. Nonetheless, its loss from collective memory diminishes the musical treasure of yesteryear, this only a hundred years after this part of that treasure was created.

While writings of George Ade, Booth Tarkington, and James Whitcomb Riley, Hoosiers all, still help many people fondly recall a time and place past (albeit remembered as through memory's mist), most have forgotten Paul Dresser, who summoned up through the medium of music a similar place and time of youthful innocence. It is wishful thinking to hope for a revival of those Dresser songs that became high-water marks in American popular culture during the last decade of the nineteenth century and the early years of our present century, but it would be entirely appropriate and reasonable to suggest that "On the Banks of the Wabash, Far Away," as the state song, be sung at public gatherings and other mass events in Indiana. This would be a fitting celebration of the centennial of "Wabash" and might even lead to its restoration in the ears, memories, and hearts of more Hoosiers and those of many beyond the state.

A professor of music at Saint Mary's College, South Bend, Indiana, Clayton Henderson has received a Clio Grant from the IHS in support of a book-length project on Paul Dresser.