



the Inside Story

Tell Taylor

Tell Taylor was an actor and composer of more than 20 sentimental songs, the best known of which is “Down by the Old Mill Stream.” He was born on October 14, 1876, on a farm east of Findlay in Hancock County. The Blanchard River in which he swam as a boy was the original “Mill Stream,” although the mill in the song no longer stands.

As a young man Taylor sang in local church choirs and worked as a deputy county clerk. While singing at the 1901 Pan American Exposition at Buffalo, N.Y., he landed a part in a vaudeville show.

Taylor and several partners opened a musical publishing house on New York City’s 28th Street, which was known internationally as the original “Tin Pan Alley.” When the publishing venture failed, an optimistic Taylor moved to Chicago, where he established the Tell Taylor Music Publishing House. Eventually, he returned to Findlay.

It was on the banks of the Blanchard River that Taylor wrote the words and melody of “Down by the Old Mill Stream.” His friends discouraged him from publishing the tune. “You’ll never sell a copy,” they declared, and the song sat on his desk for two years. Although there was some controversy over who actually wrote the song, the piece and Taylor became famous.

The song was introduced by the vaudeville quartet The Orpheus Comedy Four. Taylor traveled to Kansas City, where a manager of a Woolworth store allowed him to sing “Down by the Old Mill Stream” in the store. At that time, before the days of radio, song hits were being played and sung live in stores. In two days, Taylor sold all 1,000 copies of the song music and lyrics he had brought with him, and had to wire home for more.

Since then, more than 4 million copies of the song have been sold. Taylor was still receiving royalties from it when he died on November 24, 1937. The song is still heard today, having been recorded by John Denver and even featured on “Sesame Street” on Public Television.

Words to Know:

sentimental
mill

exposition
vaudeville

Tin Pan Alley
controversy

wire
royalties

Newspaper Activity:

Tell Taylor decided to sell “Down by the Old Mill Stream” even though his friends thought no one would buy the song. Look through today’s newspaper for articles about people who are defying the odds to get something done for themselves or their community.

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Tell Taylor beside the Blanchard River

For Discussion:

Here are the lyrics to “Down by the Old Mill Stream” (*Chicago: Tell Taylor, c. 1910*):

My darling I am dreaming of the days gone by,
When you and I were sweethearts beneath
the summer sky;
Your hair has turned to silver, the gold has
faded too;
But still I will remember where I first met you.

The old mill wheel is silent and has fallen down,
The old oak tree has withered and lies there
on the ground;
While you and I are sweethearts the same as
days of yore;
Although we’ve been together, forty years and more.

Chorus:

Down by the old mill stream where I first met you,
With your eyes of blue, dressed in gingham, too,
It was there I knew that you loved me true,
You were sixteen, my village queen, by the
old mill stream.

1. What were some of the world events happening at that time?
2. Why might the song have especially appealed to people then?



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