

MINSTRELS & CABARETS – MUSIC FOR FUN & PROFIT

By Ellen Knight¹

In 1886, the local tennis club, in its first year of existence, discovered that its membership fees were insufficient to support the costs of maintaining and improving its courts and club house. It decided to stage an entertainment to raise money.

Thus, the Wedgemere Tennis Club (named after its situation on Wedge Pond) became, in winter, the Wedgemere Minstrels. For several years the club presented musical shows (some minstrel shows and some variety shows) and were a great success. Not that the club always presented a show for their fund-raiser. Indeed, in 1888, the club challenged the Woburn Lawn Tennis Club to an all-day tournament. Though Winchester prevailed, attendance was said to have been poor, and the next year the members left the courts and returned to the stage.



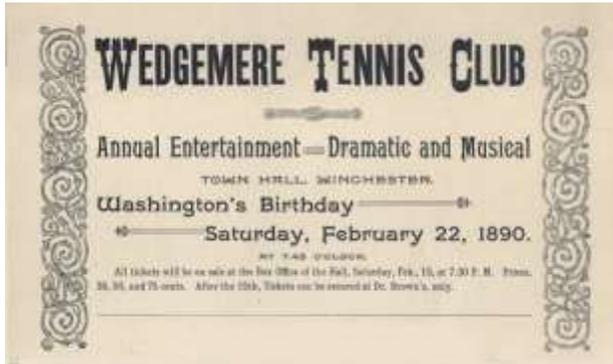
Though disparaged today for their racial insensitivity, minstrel shows were widely popular in the 19th century.² The Wedgemere programs typically presented a *mélange* of songs, choruses, instrumental numbers, and theatrical entertainment. Participating ensembles in 1889 included The Longwood Warblers, The Wedgemere Apollos, and "twelve boys from the public schools blackened and costumed a la Dockstader's Madrigal boys" singing plantation songs.³ Newspapers reported enthusiastic performances and near sell-out audiences.

Perhaps learning from the tennis club's success in giving fund-raising entertainments annually on Washington's Birthday, the Shu-Shu-Gah Canoe Club gave an entertainment in April of that same year on the occasion of the centennial anniversary of Washington's inauguration, in order to raise money to enlarge their boat house. Their show, also in Town Hall, included music by Cheney's Orchestra (from Boston), a dramatic performance, and comedietta.

Next year, the tennis club, preceded by newspaper touting as "by far the highest toned social organization in town,"⁴ then varied its program,



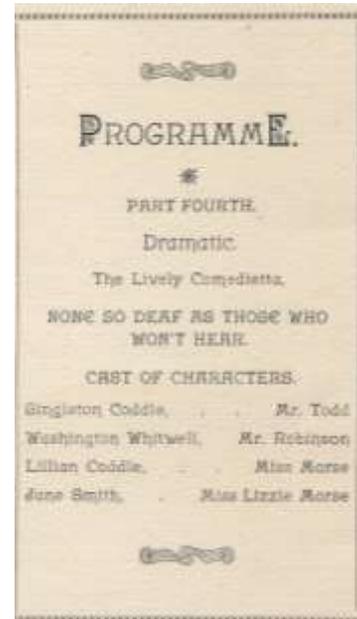
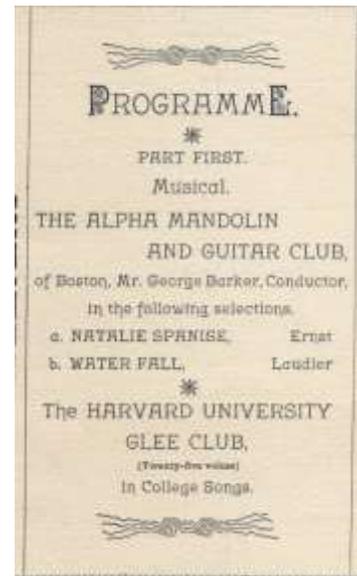
presenting the Alpha Mandolin and Guitar Club, the Harvard University Glee Club, Senor Luis T. Romero, "the Great Spanish Guitar Virtuoso," and George Barker, soloist, in addition to two comediettas. A contributor to the local paper declared that though the minstrel shows had been "most popular," this was "the best entertainment ever given in this town" and concluded "anything the club may in the future undertake stamps it with assured success."⁵



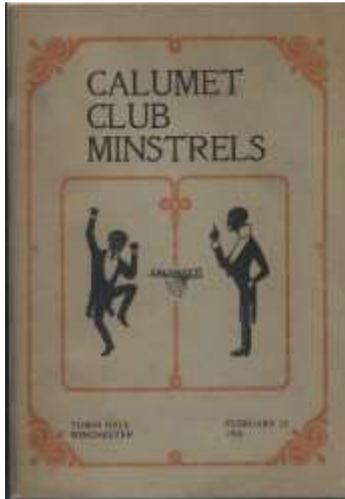
In April that year, the canoe club presented another entertainment, including two plays, cornet solos, and the Salem Cadet Band. That same month the tennis and canoe clubs discussed the possibility of consolidation and purchasing land on Bacon Street, but because of the great expense, "there was, to say the least, no enthusiasm on the part of the tennis club in regard to the project" which was abandoned.⁶

In 1891, the tennis club moved its annual entertainment to Fast Day (April 2) and returned to the genre of minstrel show. Called the "best show in the club's history,"⁷ filled with choruses, solos, quartets, jokes, stories, dances, and concluding with the burlesque "The Busted Boom or Woburn's Revenge," this entertainment was performed by 25 town singers, plus the Mozart Male Quartette of Boston, and Baldwin's Boston Cadet Orchestra. The show played to a full house and was followed by superlative comments. It was, perhaps, the climax of the club's entertainment career.

The next year the tennis club evidently gave its place on Fast Day to the Calumet Club (a social club), which wanted to raise funds to build its new club house (overlooking Wedge Pond). Profiting by the experience of both tennis and canoe clubs, this club also presented a minstrel/variety show. Like the tennis club, they also presented the Mozart Quartette and Cadet Orchestra, but also included the Woburn Banjo, Mandolin, and Guitar Club. In 1893, the tennis club reverted to celebrating Washington's Birthday, planned its most expensive production, and met financial disaster in the form of a snow storm.



The Wedgemere Minstrels succumbed to hard times, but the tradition of social and sports clubs, as well as student groups, presenting musical entertainments to raise money was established.

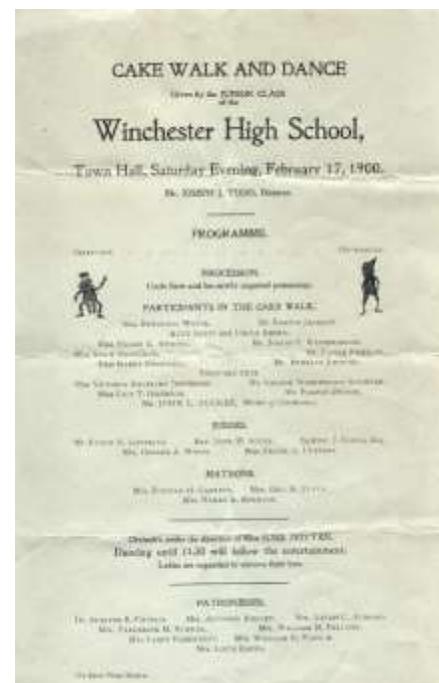


The Calumet Club continued the tradition. Minstrel shows continued to be the social highlight of the winter. “On the night of the show itself,” protested a resident using the pen name Town Pump, “the entire town is unprotected and absolutely at the mercy of any devouring element which may happen along. Every man, woman, and child is at the Show; the police are at the Show; the firemen are at the Show; all the town officials are at the Show; every horse and horselet, hack, cab and cabulet is at the Show; and the worst of it is that they are at the Show to stay, for I have the authority of our distinguished citizen General Ramsdale that neither a derrick or a stomach pump could draw any one out of the Town Hall while the show is in progress.

“I have but little doubt that nine tenths of the burglaries that have occurred in this town during the past year originated in a desire of the residents of surrounding towns to steal the secret of our success in annually packing the town hall to the very verge of suffocation.”⁸

Club members themselves often put on the show. At other times, the Calumet Club opted to present guest groups like the Megatherian Minstrels of Malden, Pi Eta Society of Harvard, and Criterion Club of Boston. In 1900, the Club observed the town’s 50th anniversary and for several years thereafter presented no show. But the minstrel show had not disappeared from town. The Winchester Amateurs gave one in 1899, and three were given by others groups in the spring of 1901.

In a similar spirit, the high school’s Class of 1901, in their junior year, raised money by holding a Cake Walk and Dance. While some students dressed to represent the nation’s new territories, others assumed the guise of theatrical black characters.





The Calumet Minstrels returned to the stage in 1908. Nearly every year thereafter, until 1917, they produced a musical or play. The minstrel show, however, waned in popularity and was replaced by musical comedies with exotic locales, such as “The Isle of Bamboo,” “The Roses of India,” “The Duke of Volendam,” and “Pepita.”

A gentleman of Winchester (a future selectman) made up for a minstrel show in 1908, the only Calumet member pictured in the program in black face.

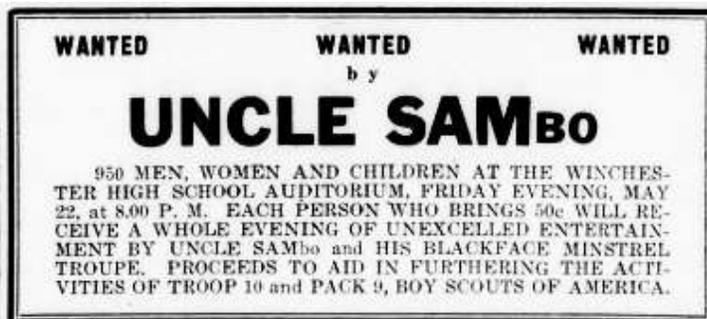


Scenes from the “Isle of Bamboo”

For some groups, the minstrel show was on the decline. For example, following World War I, the Calumet Club held a masquerade. The next year the Winton Club presented its first cabaret, beginning an annual musical tradition with endures to this day. Yet in 1918, the Daughters of Isabelle held “a real old-time black-face minstrel show” which “played to a packed house.”⁹

During the 1920s and 1930s, all manner of church groups and clubs, such as the Winchester Post of the American Legion and the Catholic Daughters of America, had occasional minstrel shows. In 1939, when the Knights of Columbus advertised one, it was reported that “this is the first minstrel show to be presented in town in a number of years and promises to have all the color

and action of the old timers which were so popular before the advent of the movies.”¹⁰ Over 1,000 people packed Town Hall. For a few more decades, the occasional minstrel show was planned (though it is unknown whether black face was used). In 1967, the Boat Club’s Talent Night Variety Show was a minstrel show ending with the club men singing “Mammy” “to tremendous applause.”¹¹



Advertisement printed in 1942 for a fund-raiser for the Boy Scouts, featuring a blackface minstrel troupe

POP CONCERTS & CABARETS



Entertainments to raise funds took on a great many forms in addition to the minstrel shows.

During the 20th century, the hospital was a major beneficiary of annual musical fund-raising events. Opened in 1912, within a few years, the hospital's endowment already proved inadequate. Therefore, for a number of years, a committee of ladies held annual Pop Concerts in the Town Hall auditorium. The repertoire was light—concerts included The Ladies Philharmonic Orchestra, Teel's Band, the Salem Cadet Band, and tenor

Roland Hayes. Programs often included both concert music and music for dancing—and the menu of ice cream confections and varieties of cigars could be far lengthier than the list of concert selections. The concerts funded valuable equipment, including the operating suite; however, the leader of the Pop Concert Committee, Rena Sanborn, conceived a more profitable scheme and in 1921 began annual horse shows.

Program		Menu	
1. Welcome	10c	1. Dinner	1.00
2. Prayer	5c	2. Dessert	.50
3. Song	10c	3. Coffee	.25
4. Reading	5c	4. Tea	.25
5. Music	10c	5. Cakes	.25
6. Address	10c	6. Fruit	.25
7. Song	10c	7. Ice Cream	.25
8. Reading	5c	8. Candy	.25
9. Music	10c	9. Nuts	.25
10. Address	10c	10. Total	2.00
11. Song	10c		
12. Reading	5c		
13. Music	10c		
14. Address	10c		
15. Song	10c		
16. Reading	5c		
17. Music	10c		
18. Address	10c		
19. Song	10c		
20. Reading	5c		
21. Music	10c		
22. Address	10c		
23. Song	10c		
24. Reading	5c		
25. Music	10c		
26. Address	10c		
27. Song	10c		
28. Reading	5c		
29. Music	10c		
30. Address	10c		
31. Song	10c		
32. Reading	5c		
33. Music	10c		
34. Address	10c		
35. Song	10c		
36. Reading	5c		
37. Music	10c		
38. Address	10c		
39. Song	10c		
40. Reading	5c		
41. Music	10c		
42. Address	10c		
43. Song	10c		
44. Reading	5c		
45. Music	10c		
46. Address	10c		
47. Song	10c		
48. Reading	5c		
49. Music	10c		
50. Address	10c		
51. Song	10c		
52. Reading	5c		
53. Music	10c		
54. Address	10c		
55. Song	10c		
56. Reading	5c		
57. Music	10c		
58. Address	10c		
59. Song	10c		
60. Reading	5c		
61. Music	10c		
62. Address	10c		
63. Song	10c		
64. Reading	5c		
65. Music	10c		
66. Address	10c		
67. Song	10c		
68. Reading	5c		
69. Music	10c		
70. Address	10c		
71. Song	10c		
72. Reading	5c		
73. Music	10c		
74. Address	10c		
75. Song	10c		
76. Reading	5c		
77. Music	10c		
78. Address	10c		
79. Song	10c		
80. Reading	5c		
81. Music	10c		
82. Address	10c		
83. Song	10c		
84. Reading	5c		
85. Music	10c		
86. Address	10c		
87. Song	10c		
88. Reading	5c		
89. Music	10c		
90. Address	10c		
91. Song	10c		
92. Reading	5c		
93. Music	10c		
94. Address	10c		
95. Song	10c		
96. Reading	5c		
97. Music	10c		
98. Address	10c		
99. Song	10c		
100. Reading	5c		



Another scheme to benefit the hospital through music and entertainment was born in 1920 and continues to the present day, the Winton Club Cabaret. For many years church women had supplied the Visiting Nurse Association with linens and other needed supplies, but this task was taken over by a group of young women who met in 1911 and decided to form a club to benefit the VNA. Club members met regularly to sew and soon were doing all the mending, a task which grew to include replacing all the hospital linen supply.

To raise money for the materials, the Club held a lawn party one year and a bridge party in another, but in 1920 the women tried a ball in which dancing was interspersed with a few cabaret numbers, including a “colored troupe” number. The 1922 cabaret also contained a minstrel number, extending the long popularity that minstrelsy enjoyed in Winchester. The cabaret became a yearly winter event and developed into full-length shows, assembled with onstage and backstage talent from many communities, including doctors and nurses, which still play to sell-out audiences in Town Hall Auditorium.



The list of musical benefits is, of course, much longer those of the few clubs noted above. However, these early examples show how townspeople enjoyed being “at the Show.”

¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of earlier articles by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Aug. 16, 1991 and Jan. 25, 1994. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

² It is beyond the scope of this article to comment on the propriety of minstrel shows. Suffice it to say, they were a favorite across the nation and residents of Winchester, which had very few black residents at the time, enjoyed them. The cream of Winchester society not only patronized them but also appeared in them.

³ *The Winchester Star*, Feb. 7, 1889.

⁴ *The Winchester Star*, Feb. 22, 1890.

⁵ *The Winchester Star*, March 1, 1890.

⁶ Shuh-Shuh-Gah club minutes.

⁷ *The Winchester Star*, April 4, 1891.

⁸ *The Winchester Star*, March 17, 1893.

⁹ *The Winchester Star*, April 5, 1918.

¹⁰ *The Winchester Star*, Jan. 13, 1939.

¹¹ *The Winchester Star*, July 2, 1967.