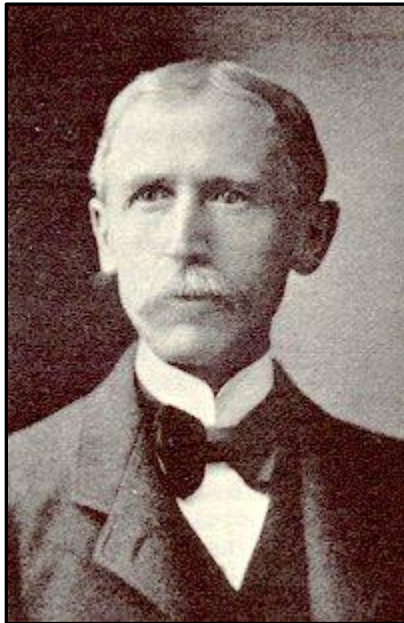


Will L. Thompson

1847 – 1909

He was born just four miles south for Calcutta, he grew up five miles west of Glasgow, studied music in Leipzig, Germany, operated a publishing business fifteen miles west of Rochester, there is a section in a small town in Ohio that carries his name, he became ill in Europe, he died in New York City, and he is buried in East Liverpool.

While music dealers were not offering to pay him what he thought his first songs were worth, he ended up self-publishing two songs, “My Home on the Old Ohio” and “Gathering Shells from the Seashore” and making enough money from them to open his own music store. “Gathering Shells” soon became one of America’s most popular songs, just behind Stephen Foster’s “Old Folks at Home.” He did so well that he was soon a millionaire. It wasn’t long before he started his own publishing business in his hometown and later in Chicago.



Will L. Thompson

He felt that he owed something to the Lord for his good fortune, so he turned his talents to writing only sacred songs. His gospel songs soon circled the globe and were being translated into other languages. While people in the big cities could hear gospel singers and attend the great revivals where his songs were finding placement, he decided that the rural people should hear his songs also. He loaded an upright piano on a two-horse wagon and drove into the county to play and sing his own songs.

In recent years, he was inducted into the Lou Holtz/Upper Ohio Valley Hall of Fame. His most popular religious song has been featured in the films *The Trip to Bountiful*** (sung by Cynthia Clawson), *June Bug**, *Urban Cowboy*, and *A Prairie Home Companion* (where it was sung by Meryl Streep and Lily Tomlin), in the Anne Tyler novel *The Accidental Tourist*, and the television series *True Blood*. This same song was sung by the choir at Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church for the funeral of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Dwight L. Moody, the famous evangelist of the later 1800's, called him "a fine character of sincerity, simplicity, and righteousness."

Will Lamartine Thompson was born in East Liverpool, Ohio on November 7, 1847, the youngest son of seven children of Josiah Thompson, who was a successful merchant, manufacturer, banker, and a two-term member of the Ohio state legislature. For a while, Josiah owned and operated a hotel in town. His mother, Sarah Jackman Thompson, was devoted to social and charitable work. East Liverpool rose from a small town to become the "Pottery Capital of the Nation." Some say it was the "Pottery Capital of the world", since the potteries of East Liverpool surpassed the potteries of England at that time. The Thompson family was involved in the local industry and became wealthy.

Young Will attend Mt. Union College in Alliance, just 35 miles to the northwest. His musical abilities took him on to the Boston Music School, the New England Conservatory of Music, and later to Leipzig, Germany, to study with the greats. His father's business took him to New York where he contracted to have his first music printed. The Will L. Thompson & Company was established to publish his sacred material. The first office opened in East Liverpool and later opened an office in Chicago, where "Softly and Tenderly" was published in 1880 in a book entitled *Sparkling Gems, Nos. 1 and 2 Combined*. The East Liverpool publishing building now houses the Museum of Ceramics.



Will L. Thompson Home, East Liverpool, Ohio

The family of Josiah Thompson is common in East Liverpool. As a result of that family, there was a Thompson Store, a Thompson Music Store, a Thompson Hotel, several Thompson houses, a Thompson Park, Thompson Row, Thompson Lane also known as Thompson Place, Thompson Pottery, even a Thompson Hill.

At the age of forty-four, Will married Elizabeth Johnson in 1891 in East Liverpool.

In 1899, Will paid a visit to evangelist D. L. Moody, who was very ill and near death. Most visitors had been turned away, but when Moody heard that Thompson was downstairs, he called for him. "Will," he said, "I would rather have written 'Softly and Tenderly Jesus Is Calling,' than anything I have been able to do in my

whole life.” It is said that Moody had diverted over a million sinners from their hellish eternal destination.

He was a member of the churches of Christ and is sometimes mentioned among those of the Restoration Movement.

Some of Will Thompson’s other songs include: “Lead Me Gently Home, Father (1879),” “Jesus Is All the World to Me (1904, Tune ELIZABETH),” and “There’s a Great Day Coming.” He always kept paper and pencil handy for those fleeting moments of inspiration when ideas would present themselves. “No matter where I am, at home or hotel, at the store or traveling, if an idea or theme comes to me that I deem worthy of a song, I jot it down in verse. In this way I never lose it.”

Will began the East Liverpool Historical Society and was a trustee of the Carnegie Public Library. He donated 100 acres of his own land to the city of East Liverpool to be used as a public park in 1899. Thompson Park is in use today with the same restrictions placed on its use by Thompson: no alcohol or gambling anytime and no ballgames on Sundays.

Thompson took ill during a tour of Europe in 1909, and his family cut short its travels to return home. He died in New York City a few weeks later. They returned his body to East Liverpool for burial in the Riverview Cemetery.

Sources:

*June Bug movie scene:

<http://musings.oscilloscope.net/post/130754400786/they-have-to-take-you-in-junebug-and-the-perils>

** Trip to Bountiful movie scene

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1EgJxPbS9ds>

www.eastliverpoolhistoricalsociety.org

A Hymn Is Born, Bonner, 1959, Broadman Press

Hymns and History, McCann, 1997, ACU Press

www.CyberHymnal.com

<https://www.findagrave.com>

<http://www.louholtzhalloffame.com/willThompson.html>

Our Garden of Song, Finley, 1980, Howard Publishing

Then Sings My Soul #2, Morgan, 2004, Thomas Nelson

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Will_Lamartine_Thompson