

Missouri Waltz J. Y. Miller



Who wrote the “Missouri Waltz”? The question is not as simple as one might think, but there is a definitive answer to a surprisingly controversial question. Some sources say it was John Valentine Epple, but that is not correct.

Mount Pleasant Cemetery is a few miles north of New Franklin, MO. A large sign near the entrance proclaims it to be the burial place of Lee Edgar “Jelly” Settle, composer of the melody of the Missouri State Song, the ‘Missouri Waltz’.

The “Jelly” nickname was given early in his life and may be a homage to Jellyroll Morton, an early Ragtime Musician.

There are at least 4 different versions of the history of the State Song. We will examine some of them:

A musician named John Valentine Epple told friends that he was touring with his band in 1910 near Macon, MO and heard an African American fiddle player who played a pleasing tune. He asked the man to repeat it and Epple wrote down the notes of the song that became the “Missouri Waltz”.

A member of Epple’s band , Art Fletcher, remembered it a bit differently. He said the band was playing in Sedalia, MO when Epple heard the tune. Like the first version, he said that Epple asked the man to play the tune and then Epple also played it and wrote down the notes.

A man from Moberly, Art Whittington, who was a friend of both Epple and Settle said that Epple’s band was playing a dance in Moberly . Settle entertained with piano tunes during an intermission. Epple asked Whittington; “What was that tune?”. Whittington introduced Epple to Settle who shared the tune with Epple.

J. B. Settle, who was Edgar Settle’s brother and the publisher of the New Franklin newspaper said that many local people had heard Lee Edgar Settle play his original composition; “Graveyard Waltz” for audiences in many towns in the Midwest. It was a popular song that was often requested. The music for the graveyard song is the same as the Missouri Waltz. He said that Settle played it in Moberly during a time when Valentine’s band was performing there and that was the time that the song was “stolen”.

Some Moberly citizens claim that a Moberly Black musician, “Dab” Hannah, picked up the tune in the southern United States and played it for Eppel. The Kansas City Star newspaper wrote that Settle picked it up and the South and taught it to Hannah.

The “St. Louis Globe Democrat” reported on these and some other variations of the origin in an article published in 1945.

Which ever of these stories is true, there is no doubt that Eppel asked Frederick Knight Logan to write an arrangement of the song and had 1000 copies of the sheet music printed in 1914. The sheet music does not mention Settle, but says that Epple “procured” the melody. At the time, there was still no lyrics for the song.

In 1909, the Missouri Daughters of the American Revolution announced a contest to create a state song for Missouri. There were 26 entries of which 3 were selected to be read at the State DAR meeting. However, no decision was made.

In 1909, Missouri Governor Herbert Hadley announced another contest to obtain a state song. He offered a \$500 prize for the best lyric and another \$500 for the best musical accompaniment. When the contest closed on 1910, there were over 1000 entries from every state and at least three foreign countries. A poem submitted by Mrs. Lizzie Chambers Hull was awarded the lyric prize, but no music was acceptable. So the contest for music was reopened.

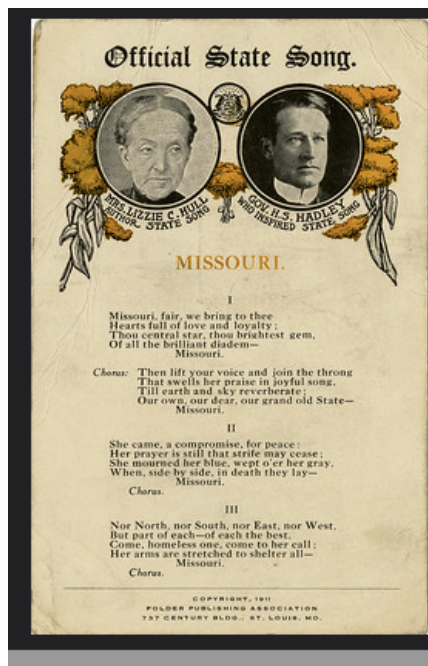


Herbert Hadley

In 1911, the DAR reopened their contest to find music for Mrs. Hull’s words. A winner was selected, but the song was still not the official state song.

Bills to select a state song were introduced in every legislative session from 1927 thru 1937, with additional bills in 1946 and 1947. All failed. In 1949, the “Missouri Waltz” was proposed again. It failed when one Senator described it as “...a despicable low class second-rate barroom ballad”. However, one week later, the bill was reconsidered and this time it passed.

Missouri finally had a state song.



Despite attempts to promote the song, it was not a great hit. One critic described it as “... a hick song”. J. A. Forster, who owned a Chicago printing company obtained the rights to the song and asked James Royce Shannon to write words for it. Shannon’s real name as William Royce. He was offered a share of royalties on future sales, but refused and charged a \$100 fee instead. Shannon had written successfully before and with his words, the “Missouri Waltz” finally became a hit. Bing Crosby, Perry Como, and other singers recorded it.

Shannon's words would not be acceptable today. The lyric included references to Pickaninnies, Mammy, and Darkies. Those words have been replaced in modern versions of the lyric.

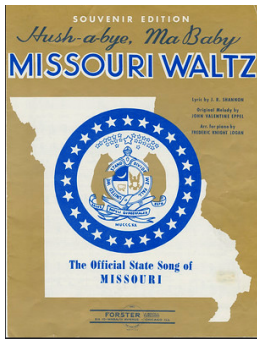
By 1940, about 6 million copies of the sheet music had been sold. It was one of the most popular songs of the day. When Harry Truman began to run for Vice-President, the song became even more popular. It was played at the Democrat political convention when he was nominated for Vice-President and became even more popular when he became President.

It was about this time that Lee Edgar Settle was touring in Oklahoma and went into a music store to look at sheet music. Seeing a song labeled "Missouri Waltz," he played it and realized for the first time that it was his melody, the old "Graveyard Waltz". He was not pleased with Epple. Epple did offer Settle a share of royalty payments, but Settle turned it down.



Lee Edgar Settle

There was still no official State Song and the process of selecting one was as complicated as the creation of the "Missouri Waltz" melody.



It was said that while the song was named "Missouri Waltz", it had a southern background, it was composed by Edgar Lee Settle from New Franklin, first published by an Iowa man in Chicago, had words written by a Michigan man as part of a campaign by a Chicago man, and it was closely associated by a Missouri born U. S. President. There were objections to some of the racial words and they were gradually replaced with more neutral terms. That controversy continues to this day as there is a petition to stop the MU band from playing "that racist song".

After Truman's election, the song was requested thousands of times and was played at almost every Truman appearance. There was a legend that Truman played it at the famous Potsdam Conference in 1945. Actually, it was played by a military bandsman at the request of British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. Russia's Premier Stalin was evidently pleased by it.





That pleasure may not have been shared by President Truman. He refused a request to perform it for Capitol Records and said in a TV interview that; "It is not my favorite and I think the words are obnoxious. I can take it or leave it and I don't give a damm about it."

He may have softened his attitude in later years. In a letter to the "Fayette Advertiser" in 1992, Freeman Alsop claimed that Truman clearly liked it and promoted it as an advertisement for Missouri".

Guy Lombardo once wrote to Truman and described the "Missouri Waltz" as one of the finest melodies ever written.

Settle was no doubt a better musician than he was a businessman. He never really promoted his music although he wrote many very successful ragtime piano pieces. One of the best known was the "XL Rag" which was dedicated to the XL Club from New Franklin.

He eventually decided that New Franklin was the best place in the world and returned there to his family home to stay. After the death of his mother in 1926, he lost much of his enthusiasm for performing and seldom would agree to perform in public. He did often play in his home about 11:00 at night. There was often a crowd of local fans gathered out side his house at 114 N. Howard Street in New Franklin who would listen to his playing.

Lee Edgar Settle was admitted to Lee Hospital in Fayette after suffering a stroke. After 3 days, he never regained consioness and died there on February 5, 1949. He never knew that his song had been named as the official State song.



It was not until 1995 that the South Howard Historical Society raised the funds to place the monument that marks his grave there today.

So, the question is answered. There is little doubt that the melody for the "Missouri Waltz" was indeed written by Lee Edgar "Jelly" Settle in New Franklin, MO.

Modern Words to "The Missouri Waltz"

Hush-a-bye, ma baby, slumbertime is comin' soon;
Rest yo' head upon my breast while Mommy hums a tune;
The sandman is callin' where shadows are fallin',
While the soft breezes sigh as in days long gone by.

Way down in Missouri where I heard this melody,
When I was a little child upon my Mommy's knee;
The old folks were hummin'; their banjos were strummin';
So sweet and low.

Strum, strum, strum, strum, strum,
Seems I hear those banjos playin' once again,
Hum, hum, hum, hum, hum,
That same old plaintive strain.

Hear that mournful melody,
It just haunts you the whole day long,
And you wander in dreams back to Dixie, it seems,
When you hear that old time song.

Hush-a-bye ma baby, go to sleep on Mommy's knee,
Journey back to Dixieland in dreams again with me;
It seems like your Mommy is there once again,
And the old folks were strummin' that same old refrain.

Way down in Missouri where I learned this lullaby,
When the stars were blinkin' and the moon was climbin' high,
Seems I hear voices low, as in days long ago,
Singin' hush-a-bye.