

Milwaukee's JENNY LIND club: A pioneer organization honoring the "Swedish Nightingale"

By Harry H. Anderson

Aspects of the forthcoming Society membership program on Saturday, October 15, will focus on the visit to the United States in 1850-51 of Jenny Lind, the so-called "Swedish Nightingale," whose tour performances in this country were promoted by the well known entertainment impresario, Phineas T. Barnum. Jenny Lind's travels in the United States attracted wide-spread public attention and newspaper coverage, but her tour did not bring her talented voice to a performance in Milwaukee or elsewhere in Wisconsin. It did, however, create circumstances which resulted in the establishment of a local organization which played an important role in the social, political and judicial history of the state's largest city under the identity as the "Jenny Lind Club,"

Prior to Lind's appearances in the East, a group of influential Milwaukeeans organized a journey to New York to attend her performances. Included in this group were such local luminaries as Alexander Mitchell, Rufus King, Judge Levi Hubbell, Hans Crocker and others. In the early 1830s, prior to the creation of railroad links to east coast cities, such a travel venture for this purpose was most unusual and attracted considerable attention and comment.

Upon their return from New York those who made the trip, along with other close business and social acquaintances, organized what became known as the "Jenny Lind Club" to reminisce about their travel experiences and discuss business and political ventures in which they shared common interests and objectives.

Not every person of prominence in Milwaukee was a "Jenny Linder," nor were these non-members sympathetic, or even friendly, towards the club and its mutual ambitions. Political and professional differences were sharply drawn in this era, and dislikes, personal enmities and even hatreds often divided community leaders over major public questions.

Typical of these feelings, although perhaps bordering on the extreme, was the relationship between Edward G. Ryan, a prominent Milwaukee attorney and Judge Levi Hubbell, a leading member of the Jenny Lind Club who occupied a dual role as a member of the Wisconsin Supreme Court and a sitting judge serving the circuit that included Milwaukee. The details behind their enmity are too extensive to be dealt with here, but it probably should be noted that Ryan served voluntarily as the lead attorney for the prosecution and the impeachment trial of Judge Hubbell, made famous in the annals of 19th century Wisconsin judicial history. The effort to convict Hubbell failed, enraging Ryan and convincing him that the outcome of the trial was an example of the power and corrupt influence on public affairs of Hubbell and his fellow members of the Jenny Lind Club. This attitude may not have been far-fetched, as evidenced by successes of Jenny Lind members in the political arena. George Walker, the promoter of settlement in Milwaukee's south side, was elected mayor of the city, Judge Hubbell was re-elected as a circuit judge, and Rufus King's newspaper, The Milwaukee Sentinel, had been awarded the city's lucrative public printing contract.

To retaliate against the Jenny Lind Club and to expose what he regarded as its odious influence in public affairs, Attorney Ryan undertook to utilize what was potentially his most formidable weapon, his pen. Possessing unique literary skill and a mastery of biting satire and keen invective, Ryan carefully

composed a fictional account of his version of a meeting of the Jenny Lind Club. Describing their intentions to influence the outcome of an approaching election, Ryan introduced a number of prominent Club members, thinly disguised by outlandish identities reflecting his satirical opinion of their shady character, ethnic backgrounds and questionable public activities. Few perceptive observers of political issues of the day had difficulty recognizing the true identities of the individuals featured in the skit. These included:

- “Judge Judas” – Ryan’s hated rival, Levi Hubbell.
- “Sandy Ragbaron” – Scottish born financier and “money power,” Alexander Mitchell.
- “Sans Scruples” – lawyer, later mayor and businessman, Hans Crocker.
- “Colonel Oldbuckets Heavysides” – the 350-pound plus mayor, George Walker.
- “Nancy Pip Nihil” – Club secretary and powerful postmaster in Milwaukee, Josiah Noonan.
- “General Renard Fitzdartmoor” – West Point graduate, militia officer and editor of The Milwaukee Sentinel, Rufus King.
- “Diego Fernando Waalwaal” – Walker’s predecessor as mayor, Don A. J. Upham

The hilarious satire first appeared in a leading Madison newspaper on September 14, 1852 and was subsequently reprinted for the great amusement of readers of other daily and weekly papers throughout Wisconsin.

Controversy over the role of the Jenny Linders remained part of local political history of the early 1850s until differences and disputes related to the approaching Civil War shifted attention to the questions of slavery and secession. From her visit to the eastern United States, Jenny Lind, the touring Swedish performer, attained fame and fortune (her earnings were estimated at \$175,000 and at least \$200,000 for her promoter, P. T. Barnum) but, for most Wisconsinites at least, the name “Jenny Lind” was far more familiar because of its association with the Milwaukee social and political club. The beautiful voice of the lovely “Swedish Nightingale” was never heard publicly in the state.