

## **Yon Yonson (John Johnson) and old fashioned Swedish-American public entertainment**

by Harry H. Anderson

Probably the most stereotypical identity of a Swedish immigrant to appear in popular entertainment in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century was the character of “Yon Yohnson,” or “Yohnny Yohnson” (Johnny Johnson) as he was sometimes called. Originally “Yon Yohnson” was the title of and principal personality in a highly popular comedy-drama that was a favorite for theater audiences in much of the American Midwest, including Milwaukee. When the play came to this city in September, 1898, one newspaper review stated that it was the same old play with the same characters and scenes, but also noted that the Bijou Theater had every seat in the house filled by a delighted crowd that found the production more enjoyable than when it had been presented locally years before.

In this Bijou run, the title role, once played by “the great Swedish character actor Gus Heege,” featured one Ben Hendricks, who it was said had his particular dialect well learned and spoke it with a quaint naturalness, sustaining the role through all three acts. The review predicted “Yon Johnson” would have a good week in Milwaukee and continue to have many years of prosperity before it yet. This prediction seems to have been correct when another item in the Milwaukee press in the spring of 1902 (when “Yon Yohnson” was again playing the Milwaukee Bijou) that the production company was soon to embark on a six-month tour of the British Isles with another Swede, Knut Erickson, handling the title role.

The “Yon Yohnson” character reappeared in another popular entertainment medium during the 1917-18 era when Tin Pan Alley songwriters featured him in the lyrics of two widely popular recordings produced for Swedish American audiences. An original dialect hit in 1917, “Holy Yumpin Yiminy” was resurrected by Anne-Charlotte Harvey in the mid-1960’s as part of a revival of interest in immigrant dialectic music. In “Holy Yumpin Yiminy” a young Swedish immigrant girl, “Hilda Hansen” described her boyfriend “Yohnny” with warm affection. Sending his picture back home to her parents in Sweden, she wrote that he may not be much to look at and didn’t know much “about reading books” but he was acquainted with “cows and dogs and everything” and most importantly of all, “Oh how my Yohnny can love.”

The romantic attachment of “Yohnny Yohnson” and Hilda reappeared the following year (1918) in a recording titled “Hello Wisconsin” popularized by the well-known singer and vaudeville performer, Sophie Tucker. In this version, Hilda arrived (by boat of course) in New York from Sweden and tried to contact “Yohnny” by telephone, saying “Hello Wisconsin” and asking whoever answered, “would you find my Yohnny Yohnson?”

Hilda added that “Yohnny” would be easily recognized because he was “over six feet high” and that she wanted to “change her name from Jansen to Yohnson.”

Historians and modern performers of Scandinavian dialect music have rediscovered such tunes as “Holy Yumpin Yiminy,” “Nikolina” (another great old-time favorite) and “Hello Wisconsin” for the enjoyment and pleasure of modern listeners, but I have yet to hear of anyone venturing to produce a revival of the comedy-drama “Yon Yohnson” for a Broadway (or local) audience.

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