

PAST TIMES: STORIES FROM THE SHELDON'S PAST

19th-Century Family Band a Local Staple

Jan Albers, former Executive Director, Henry Sheldon Museum

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The piano in the front parlor of the Sheldon Museum sports a very special covering this summer: a quilt with a surprising connection to our newly refurbished Town Hall Theater. It comes with a tale that links the Theater, the Museum and our community's heritage in some surprising ways.



Cigar Ribbon Quilt detail, 1885-1900. Collection of Henry Sheldon Museum

The coverlet, pieced out of shiny silk strips in gold and red and carefully connected with embroidery, is a fine example of what is known as a 'cigar ribbon quilt.' These quilts, popular from around 1880 to 1910, were made from silken advertising ribbons that were used to hold together bunches of cigars, one of the era's most popular, and affordable, luxuries.

Cigar distributors got their product in bulk and bunched them into groups of 25 or 50 for sale to consumers. The 'classy' silk ribbons were stamped with the companies' names—offering an intriguing study in early marketing. Our quilt sports brands ranging from the upper crust ('Portland' and 'Harvard,') the jaunty ('Chappie' and 'Dandy Five,') the unexpected ('Poet Junior' and 'Uncle Hiram'), the exotic ('Rap-a-Ho' and "Londres Perfecto') to the downright Freudian ('Bull's Head' and 'Our Dick.')

Cigar ribbon quilts made perfect piano covers, and the Sheldon's example has wonderful origins in the musical entertainment industry. It was made by Mary Emily Shepard, stage named "Minnie," the matriarch of upper New England's famed Shepard Family Concert Company.



Shepard Family Band. Collection of Henry Sheldon Museum

The Shepards began touring in 1885, making regular circuits through New York, New England and Canada, including frequent performances at Middlebury's Town Hall Theater. Billing themselves as a "Unique Musical Entertainment," their publicity reassured

potential audiences that

they had been, "Endorsed by the Pulpit, the Press and the Public." Middlebury was a favorite venue, and they returned here in 1888, 1889 and 1894, combining their visits with tours of the region. A testimonial from Bristol stated that their popularity in that town was so great that, "Besides filling Holley Hall to its utmost capacity, at least two hundred people were turned away last Saturday night."

The Shepards originally came from Lawrenceville, New York, but became so fond of Vermont that they eventually made their base in South Royalton. The whole family seems to have been musically inclined. In addition to Minnie, and her husband, patriarch James Monroe Shepard, all of the children were pressed into service.

Daughter Laura Belle, the ‘violiniste,’ was getting better all the time, under the instruction of a ‘competent master.’ (Her fans “will be astonished at the improvement in style, tone and expression.”) It was said of little Lessie that, “Among lady cornetists she has no equal.” The darling little son of the family, Master Burtie, could not help but please, for he was well-known to be, “The youngest Tuba soloist in the world; only nine years of age; scarcely larger than the instrument he plays.” He was also a “clever comedian, singer and character artist.” The baby, little Flossie, “a sweet little miss of four summers,” was said to be a “wonderful mimic and impersonator...a veritable little fairy.” Daughters Kittie and Georgia were also part of the troupe.



Playbill, Shepard Family. Collection of Henry Sheldon Museum

Music had given the Shepards a step up the ladder. According to their advertising, “Beginning in an humble way, they have gradually worked themselves to the front rank of entertainers, and to-day stand unequalled by any similar organization. Progress has been their motto.” They hoped to set an example for the families who came to hear them. As their posters exclaimed, “Bring your little ones and let them see what Children can do.” Indeed!

They were quick to reassure the public that they were getting better and better. One season’s brochure stated that they had spent months rehearsing new pieces, including a “petite operatic comedy by an eminent composer, abounding in tuneful melodies, and mirth-provoking situations; bright and catchy selections for the instrumentalists, all the latest vocal gems [and a] clever and original monologue sketch.”

Picture a steamy summer night in the Town Hall Theater. The Shepards take to the stage, working their way through a long program. A concert bill of 1889 shows them opening with a vocal duet from Misses Kitty and Belle, “Life’s Merry Morning.” The younger girls then performed a lively, rendition of “Little Shoes and Stockings,” with banjo accompaniment. A few more numbers, and then a high point, as precious Master Burtie performed, “Little Man in Red.” There were vocals, trombone solos, banjo ditties, and a sentimental waltz called, “Curl from My Baby’s Head.” That was just the first act.

After cooling refreshments during the interval, the audience was treated to a banjo ‘quintette,’ followed by a haunting song from Miss Georgie, in costume, called “The Little Widow.” Now, a change in mood, no doubt accompanied by little Burtie’s drum beat, for the popular, “By the Lights of the Wigwam.” The evening ended on a somber

note, with the touching, “Listen to My Tale of Woe.” If you can’t leave them laughing, leave them crying.

The Shepards spent twelve years on the road making music—whole childhoods for the young performers. So how did mother Minnie’s cigar ribbon quilt come to rest in the Sheldon Museum? In 2001, the daughter of Master Burtie, Bett Shepard Keefe, came to the Sheldon to donate some precious family items, including the quilt and a valve trombone. The remaining Shepards now live in the Midwest, but they wanted their heritage to be preserved back home in Vermont. The family had warm recollections of Middlebury and felt sure that the Sheldon Museum would treasure their gifts and remember their unique story.

In this special summer of 2008, pop downtown and see Minnie Shepard’s cigar ribbon quilt, along with the many other stunning Addison County quilts in our current show. Then go to our newly refurbished Town Hall Theater, and as you wait for the lights to dim, give a thought back to a time when those old walls rang with the lively tunes of the Shepard Family Concert Company.

Shepard Family Band

Publicity photo for the Shepard Family Concert Company, frequent performers at the Town Hall Theater. Minnie Shepard, maker of the cigar ribbon quilt, is shown third from the left