

Willoughby Warder Palmer: Music Hall Performer

By William H. McNitt
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Early Life

Our story begins with a double wedding that occurred in the town of Brading, located near the east end of the Isle of Wight, on the southern coast of England. On April 5, 1855, Mary Toms Warder united in matrimony with William Kernott Harvey, a tailor from Andover, Hampshire, who had been born in Brading. Concurrently, Mary's brother, William Warder, a local shoemaker, married their cousin, Frances Warder. My great grandfather, Frederick Robert Harvey, was the second child of Mary and William Harvey, while Willoughby Warder was the second child of William and Frances Warder. Thus, they were first cousins.

Despite an age difference of approximately four and a half years (Willoughby was born in 1860 and Frederick in 1865) and geographical separation between the Isle of Wight and Andover, it is likely that their families frequently visited each other via a short train journey between Andover and Southampton followed by a boat ride to the Isle of Wight. As per documents on the Brading Archives website, Mary Warder Harvey and her spouse possessed income-generating properties there, necessitating periodic visits.

Both families valued music, ensuring that their children received musical education. Frederick Harvey grew up to become a shopkeeper in Andover High Street but also engaged in musical activities, both at home and in temperance meetings, where he often played the organ and directed the choir. His elder brother, William Warder Harvey, was an organist, music instructor, and composer. Several performances of his work, "Andante (Introductory Voluntary)," are available on YouTube.

In 1881 Willoughby Warder was a shoemaker in his father's shop, but his true passion was music. A newspaper report shows that he was one of the first chair violinists of the Brading Orchestral Society for a performance at a Sunday evening service at St. Mary's Church on June 4, 1882. Later that year he and a "Miss Warder", possibly his older sister Clara, performed a concert with the local church choir at Albury (near Guildford, Surrey). The review published in the Surrey Times and County Express (Nov. 25, 1882) reports that "The violin solos by Mr. Warder were worthy of high praise" and "Miss Warder's singing (in which she made excellent use of a very rich and powerful contralto voice) was most deservedly encored."

Musician in a House Band

Around this time twenty-two-year-old Willoughby decided to leave shoemaking and focus on music. He soon began working at the Britannia Hall of Varieties in the resort town of Eastbourne, along the south coast of England in East Sussex. He conducted concerts on Eastbourne Pier and performed at the theater with a young couple, Leonard and Caroline Palmer (she performed under the name Miss Minnie Palmer). Besides their musical

performances, the theatre featured such acts as dancers, roller skaters, dramatic sketch artists, singers, and ventriloquists.

While most music hall acts moved on after brief bookings, Willoughby and the Palmers remained at the Britannia Hall for two and a half years, acting as the house band. In October 1885, however, they advertised in trade publications for another long-term position. Describing themselves as a small band with violin (Willoughby), piano (Caroline), and cornet (Leonard), they highlighted their experience in dramatic, variety, and quadrille (dance) music. Willoughby, who led the band, also composed and arranged music.

They must have accepted short-term engagements to sustain themselves, as Leonard and Caroline had to support both themselves and their four-year-old son. Within a few months they commenced a sixteen-month engagement at the Theatre Royal in Doncaster, South Yorkshire and began calling their act the Star Bijou Orchestra. During their tenure in Doncaster the Palmers welcomed their second child, a daughter named Daisy.

By June 1887, the band was advertising for a new position again. That fall they commenced an engagement in Birkenhead, just across the Mersey River from Liverpool. The local newspaper noted that “One of the chief attractions at the Prince of Wales Theatre is the Star Bijou Orchestra, which, considering that it is only composed of three artistes, produces some excellent music.” The three also offered lessons in violin, piano, cornet, harp, flute, banjo, flageolet (a wind instrument closely related to the recorder), zither, guitar, and harmony at a cost of one shilling per half hour.

The Prince of Wales Theatre reported in June 1888 that the orchestra’s “engagement has proved one of the chief attractions of the season.” When the theater reopened in August after a summer hiatus it announced, “We are glad to notice the re-engagement of the clever instrumentalists ..., who proved such an acquisition last season.”

A Touring Act: The Musical Palmers

By Fall 1889, the trio had decided to change their focus from being a house band to becoming a major act on the touring circuit. They renamed the orchestra as the Musical Palmers and Leonard and Caroline’s eight-year-old son Willie joined the act. They started performing on a wider range of instruments such as harp and banjo and began advertising themselves as “Variety instrumentalists and Bell Ringers.” To fit in as leader of the Musical Palmers, Willoughby Warder adopted the stage name Willoughby Warder Palmer for both professional and personal use.

The new act gained significant attention. The Musical Palmers hired a booking agent, who efficiently scheduled many performances, including repeat bookings at previous locations. They appeared frequently in the London area. For example, in 1890 they reported 250 performances in London at venues such as the Crystal Palace, Royal Aquarium, London Pavilion, Tivoli, Trocadero, and Metropolitan. Additionally, they appeared in music halls across the country, including Liverpool’s Star, Manchester’s Empire Palace of Varieties, Blackburn’s Lyceum, Cardiff’s Philharmonic Palace, Birmingham’s Theatre Royal, and Bath’s Pavilion.

By the time of the 1891 census, the Musical Palmers had moved from Birkenhead to a rooming house catering to music hall performers in Aston parish, Birmingham. Leonard's mother, two actors, and a song-and-dance artist were among the other tenants.

The Musical Palmers Split Up and Then Reunite

The band successfully toured for several more years. Then, on December 29, 1894, the British weekly theatrical newspaper *The Era* reported that the Musical Palmers were disbanding. Each sought new employment:

- Willoughby wanted to be a musical director for a theatre or music hall.
- Leonard aimed to perform a military musical monologue with bugle, post horn, and cornet solos.
- Caroline looked for a role as a variety instrumentalist and campanologist, assisted by "Little Daisy", her eight-year-old daughter.

The exact cause of the group's breakup is unclear. Leonard and Caroline, married in 1879, may have experienced a deterioration in their relationship. It is possible that Caroline grew closer to her colleague Willoughby or that Leonard found someone else. Whatever the reason, something damaged the relationships among the band members.

On January 26, 1895, *The Era* published a notice that Willoughby was the new musical director for the Empire Theatre in Belfast. Leonard and Caroline may not have found as much interest as they anticipated in their individual acts, so by February they were performing together again under the name Musical Palmers. They soon realized that the act needed Willoughby's leadership to be successful, and in April, they convinced him to return from Belfast to reestablish the "original" Musical Palmers. Their pursuit of musical and financial success had taken precedence over their personal disagreements.

Leonard and Caroline parted ways as a couple around this time but continued working together. Willoughby and Caroline soon paired up and Leonard found love elsewhere. Later census records show both couples as spouses, but there is no evidence of a formal divorce or of any new marriages. Leonard did eventually marry his long-time second partner, but it was not until 1924, after Caroline had died and he was free to legally do so.

"Little Daisy Palmer" continued her performance career after the reunion of the Musical Palmers, although she was frequently listed separately in programs as a "juvenile song and dance artiste" rather than as part of the family act. As she matured, she transitioned to working as a comedienne, though she also assisted with the family act, resulting in references to the five Musical Palmers. This description of their program for a 1903 engagement in Grimsby, Lincolnshire shows one of her roles:

The Musical Palmers, Military Music Experts, in their specialty, entitled: "The Officers' Rehearsal", introducing a Fantasia for three Coach Horns, a magnificent Peal of Handbells, a selection on their Silver Quartette, and a Grand Imitation of Sousa and his Band, with Miss Daisy Palmer as Sousa, in his famous march, "The Stars and Stripes for Ever."

In 1901, Willoughby, Caroline, her mother, and her two children lived in a show business boarding house in South Manchester, Lancashire, while Leonard and his family lived in another

in the same community. By 1911, Willoughby, Caroline and her kids lived with a widow and her six children in Rhondda, Glamorganshire, while Leonard and family were in London.

The Closing Years

The last newspaper listings for the troupe date from 1917. By then the music halls were in decline and other forms of entertainment were replacing them. Reduced bookings, much travel, and advancing age may have contributed to their retirement as Leonard was sixty-two and Willoughby and Caroline were in their late fifties. Willoughby soon found employment as a cellist, Caroline as a pianist, and Caroline's son William as a violinist in the theatre band at the Grand Theatre in Stalybridge, near Manchester. This undoubtedly did not pay as well as their touring career and Caroline even reported in the 1921 census that she was unemployed.

Caroline died in 1923 in Ashton, Lancashire, Willoughby died there in 1936, and Leonard died in 1937 in Luton, Bedfordshire. Leonard and Caroline's son William died in 1960 in Hyde, Cheshire. I have not found later records for their daughter Daisy.