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## Rudimental Classics 'Hell on the Wabash'

By Robert J. Damm

ell on the Wabash" (with melody) was included in *The Moeller Book* which, along with "Wrecker's Daughter Quickstep," were described as "two very old favorites that can never be improved upon" (p. 63). He also quoted Bruce as having said, "Without this rudimental instruction we can have only indifferent players, comparatively ignorant of the nature of the very instrument they play upon" (p. 10).

As a fife and drum duet, "Hell on the Wabash" first appeared in *The Drummer's and Fifer's Guide* (Bruce and Emmett) in 1862. This important book provided instruction for both the drum and the fife in score form and included music notation for the camp duty. George Bruce and Dan Emmett authored the book because they were concerned about the quality of training received by the field musicians in the army (Olson, p. 86). The history of "Hell on the Wabash" touches on both military and popular music traditions, reflecting the corresponding lives of its authors.

George B. Bruce was considered a "first-rate drummer" who had studied with Charles Ashworth (Olson, p. 86). He held the prestigious post of drum major and principal instructor at the military drumming school on Bedloe's and Governor's Islands, New York Harbor during the Civil War. He ended his military career in the Seventh Regiment New York State Militia (National Guard) Band (Bruce and Emmett, preface). Moeller paid tribute to Bruce's reputation in the preface of *The Moeller Book*, stating that, "the one and only school is the one set by Geo. B. Bruce in 1862 for the U. S. Army."

Dan Emmett was born in Mount Vernon, Ohio in 1815. Emmett received brief but intense fife and drum instruction in the U.S. Army beginning at age 17. In 1834, he claimed to be 21, the minimum age for military service at that time; his military career ended abruptly in 1835, when it was discovered that he was underage (Nathan, 104–108). In the preface of his snare drum method book (*Emmett's Standard Drummer*) he described the training he received:

At the early age of 17, I enlisted in the U. S. Army as a fifer, and was stationed at Newport Barracks, Ky., the then school of practice for the western department. For one year, or more, I practiced the drum incessantly under the tuition of the renowned John J. Clark, (better known as "Juba"), and made myself master of the "Duty" and every known "side beat" then in use. Being transferred to the 6th U. S. Infantry, then stationed at Jefferson Barracks, Mo., I was retained as "leading fifer" until discharged. In the meantime I continued my drum practice, which was then taught according to the School of Ashworth (Galbreath, 48).

Emmett's next career move was to join the circus; there he began composing "Negro" songs, playing the banjo, and singing in blackface. Emmett moved to New York in 1842 where he joined three other blackface performers and established The Virginia Minstrels. This troupe was actually the first minstrel band—one consisting of four blackface musicians playing fiddle (Dan Emmett), banjo (Bill Whitlock), tambourine (Dick Pelham), and bones (Frank Brower). By making the ensemble the nucleus of continuous "Ethiopian" scenes during an entire evening, they essentially created the minstrel show (Nathan, 109–146).

The blackface banjoist, playing as a soloist, or accompanying a song or dance, became an established fixture in the popular minstrel theatre.

A number of banjo tunes, customarily called "jigs," indicating they were associated with dances, made their first appearance in the 1840s. These banjo tunes were made widely available to the public in published method books starting in the 1850s. Dan Emmett included 48 banjo tunes in an early manuscript collection he compiled sometime between 1845 and 1860 (there is no date on the manuscript). "Hell on the Wabash Jig" was included in this book (Nathan, 189-195). Emmett's "Hell on



Dan Emmett

the Wabash Jig" for banjo is a variant of an Irish hornpipe called "The Night We Made the Match" as illustrated in Nathan (p. 197). In keeping with practices of the day, Emmett borrowed an existing folk melody and altered the rhythm for use in the minstrel show and then gave the tune a new name. He is also credited with composing "Dixie," "Old Dan Tucker," and "The Blue Tail Fly" (Porter, p. 6).

"Hell on the Wabash" also became a standard in the fiddle repertoire. In *The Fiddler's Companion*, an Internet index of traditional fiddle tunes, "Hell on the Wabash" is described as an old-time American breakdown originating as a syncopated banjo tune with minstrel origins (Kuntz).

Concerning the tune's association with the fiddle, Carl Sandburg wrote the following poem included in *Slabs of the Sunburnt West*:

Hell on the Wabash

When country fiddlers held a convention in Danville, the big money went to a barn dance Artist who played Turkey in the Straw, with variations.

They asked him the name of the piece calling it a humdinger and he answered, "I call it 'Hell on the Wabash."

The two next best were The Speckled Hen, and Sweet Potatoes Grow in Sandy Land, with variations.

There is no definitive explanation for Emmett's title of "Hell on the Wabash." There is plenty of speculation to be found on the Internet, but the information there is contradictory and fails to indicate any evidence from a primary source. Even the most recently published books about

Emmett (e.g., Porter, 2008), which draw on previously unknown letters and manuscripts, provide no clues about this composition. Information that may once have been common military drumming knowledge has been lost to modern scholars. If Emmett took an Irish tune and made a syncopated version of it to be played on his banjo in a minstrel show, why did he call it "Hell on the Wabash"? Given the times, "hell" was a serious word, and when included in *The Drummers and Fifers Guide* it was written as "H--LL on the Wabash." He would not choose this title without a good reason, but there is no known citation to explain his motives. Most likely, the title was inspired by one of the three battles in U.S. history that were fought near the Wabash River: the Battle of Vincennes (1779), St. Clair's Defeat (1791), or the Battle of Tippecanoe (1811).

The title certainly could have been inspired by the grueling march to Vincennes made by George Rogers Clark and his men during the American Revolution. Clark led approximately 170 men through the icy Wabash floods of what is now the State of Illinois to surprise the British at Fort Sackville in Vincennes. Then a French trading post, Vincennes is now known as the oldest city in Indiana. The men set out in the dead of winter on a perilous journey across country that was alternately deep in snow and cold water. In 18 days, Clark and his men covered 180 miles under the most difficult and exhausting conditions imaginable. The men waded in water up to their waists, frequently sinking up to their shoulders, and stumbled over underwater obstacles that they could not see on a trek that was as "hideous and interminable as a nightmare" (Smith, p. 1201-1205). Clark wrote in his memoirs that one of the drummers amused the other soldiers by floating on his drum in the river (Smith, p. 1203). After this remarkable winter march across the flooded Illinois prairie, the group successfully recaptured Vincennes on February 25, 1779 (Unrau, p. 39). British Lieutenant Colonel Henry Hamilton surrendered Fort Sackville after what is considered one of the classic military expeditions in the annals of warfare, restoring the Northwest to American control (Smith, p. 1210).

Alternatively, it could have been "The Battle of the Wabash," also known as "St. Clair's Defeat," that inspired "Hell on the Wabash." On November 4, 1791, the United States Army led by General Arthur St. Clair was camped near the head waters of the Wabash River. Early in the morning, they were overrun by Miami, Shawnee, and Delaware forces led by Little Turtle, Blue Jacket, and Buckongahelas. The battle continued for nearly three hours until St. Clair realized that his entire force would soon be wiped out (Cooke, 79). With his army overwhelmed and his camp completely surrounded, St. Clair called for a retreat (Sword, 186). A drummer sounded retreat, but in the confusion and noise, nobody seemed

to understand what to do (Sword, p. 187). The retreat was so desperate that they abandoned the dead and wounded, as well as two wagons, 1,200 muskets and bayonets, 163 axes, and eight cannons (Sword, 188). Of the approximately 1,400 troops, casualties included 630 soldiers killed and 283 wounded (Denny, 171). Nearly all of the 200 camp followers (wives, mistresses, and laborers) who had accompanied the expedition were also killed. The wounded army captives were tortured and killed by the Native Americans (Sword, 188). Historians consider St. Clair's Defeat to be the worst loss ever suffered by the United States Army at the hands of Native Americans (Sword, 195).

Lastly, the Battle of Tippecanoe may have been the inspiration for "Hell on the Wabash." General William Henry Harrison, in response to an intertribal defensive alliance being promoted by Shawnee leader Tecumseh and his brother Laulewasikau (known as the Prophet), launched a strike against the Native Americans on November 7, 1811. The battle took place at Prophetstown, the Indian capital near the confluence of the Tippecanoe and Wabash Rivers. Harrison burned the village, and although the two sides suffered equal losses, the battle was widely regarded as a U.S. victory. Harrison used the slogan "Tippecanoe and Tyler, Too!" to remind voters of his victory at the Battle of Tippecanoe and became President of the United States in 1841 (Britannica, 792).

William F. Ludwig Jr., a respected drum historian, indicated that, "There was a war on the Wabash River involving frontier troops and Indians... No doubt 'Hell on the Wabash' refers to this episode of American history" (written coresspondence from William F. Ludwig Jr., 1998). The Yalesville Fife & Drum Corps of Wallingford, Connecticut feature "Hell on the Wabash" on their homepage with an explanation that the piece "Honors the famous Battle of Tippecanoe."

### **CONCLUSION**

The historical information in this and my previous *Percussive Notes* articles about "Three Camps" (July 2010), "Yankee Doodle" (Nov. 2010), and "The Downfall of Paris" (Jan. 2011) was compiled in order to foster an understanding of four rudimental classics within the military context in which they originally developed. Many important facts have been lost to obscurity, but from available sources, these articles contain a summary of pertinent information known about these compositions. It is through knowledge of history and the authentic experience of playing these pieces with fife (or flute), that students may best learn the value and meaning of the classic rudimental repertoire. Frederick Fennell called for ensemble performance in the 1956 foreword of *The Drummer's Heritage*, arguing that playing these classics as solos would "violate the fundamental laws of

## Hell On the Wabash





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ensemble playing" and neglect "the key to the proper technical interpretation of complicated rudiments" (p. 9). Today's drum students have access to many resources from which they develop high levels of technical proficiency. By taking time to learn their history, they will also gain a deeper appreciation of their heritage.

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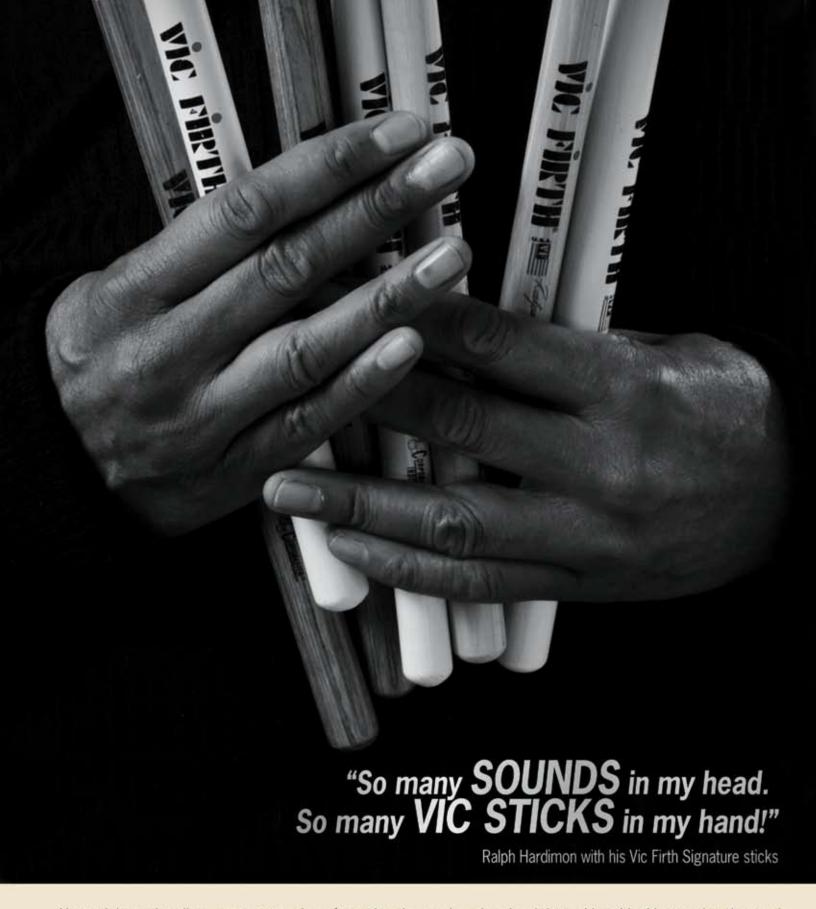
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