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FAVORITE PIONEER RECORDING ARTISTS

GEORGE N. and AUDLEY F. DUDLEY
(of the OSSMAN-DUDLEY TRIO)

by Jim Walsh

This should be an easy article to write.

About all I shall have to do is compose a few introductory paragraphs, then copy portions of several letters I have received from a charming lady, Florence Taylor Dudley (Mrs. George N. Dudley), and accompany the quotations with occasional explanatory comment of my own. But, simple as the job seems, the result should have one important effect. The "mystery" which for years has surrounded the Ossman-Dudley Trio in the minds of thousands of record collectors will be a mystery no longer.

In 1948 I wrote a series of HOBBIES articles about the late Vess L. Ossman, widely known in the 1890's and the early 1900's as "The Banjo King." One of the subjects I mentioned was my inability up to that time to find out who had played with Ossman in the Ossman-Dudley Trio. Perhaps it would be well to quote briefly what I said in the November, 1948, issue: "In 1906 Vess came through with another innovation - the Ossman-Dudley Trio, consisting of himself as banjoist, and two other talented players, one a master of the mandolin and the other of the harp-guitar. The guitar player may have been Roy Butin or it could have been Parke Hunter, who could play just about anything. The mandolinist must have been named Dudley, but I've never been able to find out WHAT Dudley. At one time I suspected the late S. H. Dudley, the Hayden Quartet baritone, but he assured me it wasn't he. That there was a 'Mr. Dudley' is shown by the Edison cylinder list for December, 1910, in which 'The Entrance of Topsy' scene from 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' is by Len Spencer and Company. The cast of characters includes 'Messrs. Ossman and Dudley' as banjo players. I asked Mrs. Muhigan, Mr. Ossman's daughter, if she knew anything about Dudley, and she replied: 'I recall hearing Pop speak of 'Dudley,' but remember nothing about him.'

"The Ossman-Dudley Trio made several catchy records, the most popular of which was their Victor of 'St. Louis Tickle' - certainly one of the most captivating bits of ragtime ever put on wax. Other good sellers were 'Chicken Chowder,' 'Dixie Girl,' and 'Koontime Kaffee Klatsch.' The Victor record catalog for September, 1908, commented on the trio's records:

"A novel feature of our instrumental list, which has been a most successful one. Trios by banjo, mandolin and harp-guitar - very loud, yet without a suspicion of harshness. Mr. Ossman, whose ability as a banjoist is well known, has associated himself with two famous players of string instruments, and the combination has made some extremely pleasing records. The harp-guitar gives a support to the other instruments which is decidedly effective.' "

It seems odd that S. H. Dudley (Sam H. Rous) couldn't remember the names of the Ossman-Dudley Trio members, since he was assistant manager of the Victor artist and repertoire department for years, besides being catalog editor. He no doubt wrote the description I have just quoted. On second thought, perhaps it isn't so baffling that he didn't remember, for some thirty year's elapsed between the making of the trio's records and my putting the question to him. A man who has dealt with hundreds of artists and thousands of records is entitled to a little forgetfulness after a generation has gone.

As time went on, I despaired of ever finding who played with Ossman in the once popular trio. Then, in the HOBBIES article I have quoted, I did something that proves the danger of trusting to circumstantial evidence. Because Parke Hunter frequently worked with Ossman and played different instruments, I thought he might be the guitarist. But I was even more inclined to suspect Roy Butin, because Butin, forty-odd years ago, was probably the best known guitar player in America. As the partner of the mandolin virtuoso, Valentine Abt, he made some of the earliest double-faced Victor records. He also played with another great mandolinist, Samuel Siegel. In vaudeville he and the violinist, Michael Banner, were famous as The Olivette Troubadours, a name they also used in making Edison cylinders. What more natural, then, than to suspect that Butin was a member of the Ossman-Dudley Trio?

But he wasn't. And neither, in spite of the circumstantial evidence, was Parke Hunter. Vess Ossman's partners in the trio were two brothers. Audley Dudley played the triple-string mandolin, and George N, the harp-guitar. And there, with the addition of the immortal Sylvester Louis (*Vess*) Ossman, you have the Ossman-Dudley Trio! Now that I look back on the mystery which is a mystery no longer, I wonder why it never occurred to me that there might be two players named Dudley in the trio.

The way I stumbled on the solution, or, rather, had it forced on me, is an unusual story in itself. Most readers of this department know that the late John H. Bieling gave parties in September, 1946 and 1947, at his home in Hempstead, Long Island, for a number of his fellow pioneer recording artists and their admirers. Mr. Bieling died in 1948, but the series of parties continued, sponsored by record collectors.

More than two years after John Bieling's death, Mrs. George N. Dudley wrote to him, on November 13, 1950, from her home, 23 Central Avenue, Amityville, Long Island:

"About three years ago I saw a picture in *Newsday* of old-time phonograph artists at a gathering in your home. Would it be possible for me to obtain a record of the Ossman-Dudley Trio? They made records for Victor and Columbia at the time Ada Jones, Billy Murray, Will Oakland, Caruso, Melba and other top-notchers were recording.

"My husband is the last of the trio, being seventy-three years of age, so I surely would appreciate it if I could possibly get one of these records. Thanking you for whatever information you may give me, sincerely, Mrs. George N. Dudley."

The Bieling family turned this letter over to their neighbor and friend, E. B. Burke, president of Pioneer Recording Artists and Admirers and Bryant was thoughtful enough to send me a copy. It gave me a moment of real excitement, for, thanks to a kindly twist of fate, it was apparent that I now had the means of solving that mystery of the Ossman-Dudley Trio. I wrote immediately to Mrs. Dudley, telling her I had long enjoyed the trio's recordings and asking for information concerning its members. This she gave in generous measure.

And now we have almost reached the point where I may begin quoting from Mrs. Dudley's letters, sometimes rearranging the paragraphs, which she set down just as they occurred to her, so that they will give a more coherent narrative. But first I should like to mention that the Ossman-Dudley Trio appears to have been the successor to the Ossman Banjo Trio, which made several records in 1904 and 1905. The earlier group consisted of Ossman and two other banjoists, Parke Hunter and William Fanner. Their records included a hauntingly pretty Edison cylinder, No. 8841, "I've Got a Feelin' for You," issued in November, 1904, and two Columbia cylinders, Number 32666, "Egypt," came out in the April, 1905, Columbia list, and 32699, "Hurrah, Boys!" a two-step, in May. Vess Ossman also recorded a number of duets with Hunter and Fanner as his partners.

Now, Mrs. Dudley's letters, with occasional comment, where it appears to be needed, by myself:

"In regard to the Ossman and Dudley Trio, my husband, George (the older of the Dudley Brothers) played a 36-string harp guitar; his brother, Audley, a triple-string mandolin, and of course, Ossman, the five-string, long-neck banjo, which he played with his fingers (*this was the original gut-strung banjo, played in the "classic" style - GM*).

"George N. was born in Baltimore, Maryland, and Audley F. was born on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Their grandmother had her plantation on the Eastern Shore. Their grandfather was a member of the House of Representatives. Colonel Tilghman, of the Eastern Shore, wrote two volumes of 'The History of Talbot County,' which mentions the Dudleys. He knew my husband's father, who was a trainer of racing and pacing horses and drove a high-wheeled sulky. He built a half-mile race track on the old estate. George's father had a stock farm and owned an offspring of the famous race horse, 'Hannibal.'

"The boys were left orphans when very young. When they grew older, being musically inclined, they formed a mandolin orchestra, which also included guitars. They went to Baltimore and played in the Palm Garden of Kernan's Theater for quite a few years. All the celebrities used to stop there, among them Nat Wills, Weber and Fields, Walter C. Kelly, McIntyre and Heath and numerous others. When they finished there, they came to New York and did Sunday night concerts in all the theaters. Finally, Vess heard about the Dudley Brothers, hence the Ossman-Dudley Trio. They were with Vess for quite some time, not only doing records, but they played in the homes of some of the wealthiest people.

"Here's a little story I think you might get a kick out of. They had a date at one of these homes, so naturally they walked up the front steps, and who should come up to greet them but the 'brass-buttons.' When he saw the instruments he directed them to the 'help' entrance.

Ossman spoke up and said, 'We go in the front door, otherwise no music tonight!' I get a kick out of that because I knew Ossman very well, having worked for him at the Martinique Hotel, 32nd Street and Broadway."

To interrupt Mrs. Dudley for a moment, anyone who knows Vess Ossman, even if, like myself, only from the reminiscences of his friends, will enjoy that anecdote. He was a man of fierce pride and easily aroused temper, and old-time phonograph company workers who can remember the feeling he used to display when a banjo string broke in the middle of a recording session will wonder that he showed so much restraint when the doorman tried to be snooty. It's a safe bet that the trio went in through the front door. After all, Vess had played for President Theodore Roosevelt and King Edward of England, and he wasn't a bit impressed by somebody who just happened to be wealthy! Back to Mrs. Dudley:

"The Ossman-Dudley Trio used to play a lot for Cornelius Vanderbilt, Sr. They played in his home, also on his twin yachts, as well as at the 47th Regiment Armory, where he was Commodore. Ossman always carried an extra banjo with him for Mr. Vanderbilt, because he liked to sit down and play with the boys. He is only one of the elite that they played for, so you can gather from that the class of work they had.

"The trio also played Sunday night concerts in the theaters. Vess was late getting in one Sunday, so he hurriedly dressed to 'tux,' but forgot to change his shoes, so he went on stage with tan shoes. Well, that was 'our Vess!' The audience got a laugh out of that. Then, another time, the stagehand put out three gilded chairs, and poor Vess would have to get the rickety one, so down he went. That got a howl also, but probably the audience thought it a part of the act. They also played on the 'apron' of the old Hippodrome Theater, where Radio City Music Hall now is.

"I also got a kick out of Dud when he tells about working in not such a choice neighborhood. There were quite a number of youngsters up in the balcony, who came 'armed.' The boys always played good numbers, such as 'Poet and Peasant' and 'William Tell' overtures, but the youngsters didn't like that, so they started throwing their missiles. One lemon struck Vess' banjo, which resounded all over the place. Pop sure does laugh when he tells of that experience!

"In regard to Vess' making records with Bill Farmer," Mrs. Dudley continues, "I have never heard any of those records, but I heard Farmer when he was playing at Faust's in Columbus Circle. In those days they called such places cabarets; today they call them night clubs. My husband remembers Parke Hunter. Vess' children were too young for him to remember, outside of Vess, Jr. Was very much surprised to learn of his death. I had often wondered what happened to him and whether he had followed in his father's footsteps."

Mrs. Dudley said that a financial disagreement such as has been common to the theater since its earliest days and probably always will be, caused the Dudley Brothers to end their business association with "The Banjo King," but that the personal friendship remained unimpaired. She relates:

"When George and Audley gave up records they opened an agency of their own and had a very fine class of work. They developed banjos. My husband plays a long-neck 'plectrum' banjo. Finally, his brother died about the first of September, 1916, and we were married September 5 in Washington, D. C., by the same minister who preached the funeral service for Audley. He is buried in Bladensburg, Maryland. Had my husband thought, he would have had Audley taken to the Eastern Shore, as his father had a big 'plot' there.

"The Dudley Brothers had all George Hamilton Dean's work. He was opposite St. Patrick's Cathedral, where Radio City is today. Dean was one of the biggest caterers in New York. Then they had Louis Sherry's, at 44th Street and Fifth Avenue, and played at some of the most wonderful affairs.

"After my husband lost his brother he lost heart in music - that is, for a while. At that time WEAJ came into existence. They called up my husband and asked him if he would go on the air the opening night, but George told them he was not interested, since he had lost his brother. They said that on account of his being one of the pioneer record makers they would very much like to have him. Well, that was that, but shortly afterwards he 'perked up' and thought he would carry on the Dudley name again. He got Sherry's back and appeared there with his 'Versatile Sextet,' singing and instrumental. The musicians doubled up on two or three instruments.

"Thereafter we were on WOR, known as the 'Novelty Quartet,' of which I was one of the members. At that time there were no commercials, I'm sorry to say. We would have had to stay on for quite some time before being 'sold.'

"I remember that one time Vess could not leave New York to go on a show playing in Richmond, Virginia, so he sent Audley as banjoist in his place. Vess had charge of music and the show at the Martinique at that time, so Vess, Jr. went down and managed the show - my first appearance in show business. This was a long time after the Ossman-Dudley records."

Mrs. Dudley gives the following information concerning the senior Ossman, which may supplement my former Hobbies series on "The Banjo King":

"Vess came from Hudson, in upstate New York. When he was a young fellow he used to play on the trains coming down to New York and back, wearing a 'linen duster.' While riding back and forth to New York, he heard of a contest being held at Carnegie Hall, so he threw his hat in the ring and came out with high honors. I think it was then that they named him 'the Banjo King' because shortly after that he went to Europe and played for King Edward. In my opinion there was only one 'Banjo King' and I mean just that...Vess used to play harmonics that no one ever does today. It was beautiful... But I have always enjoyed listening to Fred Van Eps' records, also those of Harry Reser. Reser is a later comer but very good."

Mrs. Dudley says that her husband was seventy-five years of age on April 24, 1952, and that his brother Audley would be seventy-three if he were alive. "I don't count," she adds, "because I'm only a kid of sixty!"

I was sorry to learn that neither Mr. nor Mrs. Dudley is in the best of health. She has arthritis and high blood pressure with, she says, bronchial asthma, to top it off. Mr. Dudley suffers from sinus troubles, and, because of low resistance, is constantly plagued with colds. However, he has been for many years a valued worker in a profession about as far removed from music as it well could be. Says Mrs. Dudley:

“My husband still commutes every day to New York and does not get home until late at night. He is in the advertising business – has been for years. Even when he made records he was in the business, and is one of the best men in his field today. He still has that wonderful spry gait, bless his heart! You would never guess his age. He was forty when I married him and is still going strong, outside of his sinus. He has always been termed ‘the old iron horse,’ taking care of business during the day and his music at night.

“Incidentally, George has had wonderful musicians working for him. Felix Arndt, composer of ‘Nola,’ was one of his piano players. He made piano rolls for Aeolian. (Arndt, who died in the 1918 flu epidemic, was also the first pianist of the Van Eps Trio, being succeeded in 1916 by Frank Banta, and he likewise made solo Victor records. – J.W.)

“‘Dud,’ as he is known, is very nervous and temperamental. After all, there’s a reason for that, because, as I said, he gets up every morning at 5, leaves at 6:30, and I never know what time he will get home. He has a very responsible job – anything that goes wrong with the metal advertising plates, he has to see that it’s made O.K. before going to press. If there is a defect in a half-tone, they have him take care of it. When he is finished you can’t tell where the defect or scratch was.”

Mrs. Dudley mentioned in one of her letters that she was sending me a photograph showing the Dudley Brothers and two other musicians with whom they played for afternoon teas. I have submitted the photo for reproduction with this article. In the order of appearance in the picture, the musicians are Henry Lundgren, ‘cello; Audley Dudley, banjo; Charles Cochran, organ; and George Dudley, harp guitar. Mrs. Dudley also sent a photo of herself, taken in 1913. “In those days,” she says, “I weighed 123 pounds. That’s why they called me ‘The Little Girl With the Big Voice.’ Now,” she adds jokingly, “I’m ‘the Big Parade.’”

Mrs. Dudley also gives some interesting details of her own professional career. She writes:

“I am sending you an old program from the Martinique Hotel. They had me in *Variety* as being a riot every night. ‘The Chocolate Soldier’ was playing on Broadway at the time, and I was under contract to use ‘My Hero’ and ‘Sands of the Desert’ for a whole season. We had the reputation of having the best show along Broadway, bar none, under the supervision of Vess Ossman. That was in the time of Churchill’s, Stanley’s, Lauber’s Bustanoby’s, the Hofbrau, Marlborough, Blenheim, Faust’s, Tokio, Pekin Reisenweber’s, Rector’s, Wallach’s, Maxim’s and others. When Vess got out the place was not the same, as the hotel had also changed ownership. I had everything that came through there – sang in the tearoom, also with Holmes’ Concert Orchestra in the Louis Room, and then the Dutch Room at night, as well as at banquets and dinners. Ossman thought a lot of me. He had all the confidence in the world in my making

good. I only wish we'd had radio and television in those days. Years ago we didn't have to sing into a mike to be heard. You had to be there with the goods - or else!"

Returning to her husband's career, Mrs. Dudley continued:

"After Audley died, 'Dud' met Vess on Broadway, and Vess said he felt very bad about Audley's death. He intimated that he would like to 'double up' with 'Dud,' but my husband would not go on the road, because he had too much of his own work to take care of. Eren Mondorf, who was manager of Keith's Circuit, previously had wanted the Dudley Brothers to go on the road but they refused. My cousin, Thurland Chattaway," she adds, "was the composer of 'Mandy Lee' and 'Red Wing,' which were very popular years ago and still are today. Of course he had many others, but those seemed to be outstanding."

And now I have come to the end of my quotations from Mrs. Dudley's letters. But a few words about the Ossman-Dudley Trio records seem in order before closing the article.

The first two Victors by the ensemble were issued in April, 1906. They were No. 4624, "St. Louis Tickle," and 4625, Victor Herbert's "AI Fresco." The "Tickle," composed by Barney and Seymore, was the most popular of all Ossman-Dudley records. When Victor introduced its double-faced discs in 1909, it was coupled on No. 16092 with Ossman's solo, "A Gay Gossoon." This stayed in the catalog until the advent of electrical recording, but, probably because of defects in the master, was remade in 1923 by a group headed by Fred Van Eps and calling itself the Plantation Trio. Van Eps also remade the "Gossoon" side.

"AI Fresco" was less popular and stayed in the catalog only a couple of years. It was not issued in double-faced form. In May, 1906, the trio was represented by "Koontown Kaffee Klatsch" (No. 4659), which also had a relatively brief life. Then in June came No. 4679, J. Bodewalt Lampe's tuneful march and two-step "Dixie Girl." The supplement writer commented:

"A march by the composer of 'Dreamy Eyes' and 'Creole Belles' is sure to be a good one, and 'Dixie Girl' is quite worthy of Mr. Lampe's reputation. Played by this new instrumental combination with snap and precision."

"Dixie Girl," like "St. Louis Tickle," proved to be a big seller. It was combined on double-faced record No. 16667 with one of Ossman's best solos, "A Bunch of Rags," and stayed in the catalog for about twenty years. It also was remade (in 1921) by the Plantation Trio, but the later record omitted the mandolin, and the instrumentation consisted of two banjos and a guitar. Van Eps likewise did a re-make of "Bunch of Rags." The Ossman-Dudley Trio's first Columbia records appeared in September, 1906. Both were two-minute cylinders. On 32984, the trio played the "Koontown Kaffee Klatsch" march and two-step, composed by J. P. Greenberg, which it had previously recorded for Victor. Selections from "The Mayor of Tokio," a musical comedy by Will F. Peters, appeared on 32985.

In October, 1906, the trio made its first appearance on Columbia discs, with No. 3476 "Koontown Kaffee (or Koffee, as Columbia spelled it) Klatsch." The record was more successful, for some reason, than on the Victor, and when this oddly haunting number was combined on Columbia double-faced record No. A218 with Ossman's "Buffalo Rag" it remained a standard seller for many years.

One month later, in November, No. 3491, the disc version of the "Mayor of Tokio" selections came out. It was not so popular as "Koontown," although it was combined on A219 with a cornet and trombone duet of "Alice, Where Art Thou?" by unidentified players. (The latter was afterwards re-coupled on A881 with a flute solo, "I'll Follow Thee.")

Apparently, no more Ossman-Dudley records were issued until April, 1907, when No. 3591 came out, containing Irene Giblin's very catchy two-step, "Chicken Chowder." It may have been issued later on a cylinder, but I haven't been able to trace it.

Also in April appeared what almost certainly is the rarest Ossman-Dudley record - BC cylinder No. 85109 of a two-step by Charles Seymour, "The Panama Rag." This cylinder played for three minutes as compared to two minutes for the average "roller" and could be used only on a special Columbia instrument with a six-inch mandrel. Not a great many of the longer-playing cylinder machines were sold, and records to fit them are hard to find.

As far as I can learn, that completes the list of Ossman-Dudley records, except that "Chicken Chowder" was doubled on No. A220 with Ossman's "Policy King" solo. In double-faced form, it sold well for fifteen years or more. Oddly enough, Vess doesn't seem to have made any Edison cylinders with the Dudley Brothers. The three may have played together for Leeds, Imperial, Zonophone or some of the other "off brands" that were current in 1906. However, I have not seen any such records listed.

But, brief as the Ossman-Dudley list may seem, all their records make good listening, and Mr. and Mrs. Dudley would very much like to obtain copies of them all. If any HOBBIES readers have copies they can spare and will mail them to Mrs. George N. Dudley, 23 Central Avenue, Amityville, Long Island, New York, they will be received with genuine appreciation.

Since the foregoing was written, I have received a few more reminiscences from Mrs. Dudley, which I shall add here as a "supplement."

"My husband's middle name," she writes, "is Nabb and his brother's was Fleming. Their father was William George Dudley. I cannot recall their grandfather's name, but imagine it also was William George.

""Dud's' height is about five feet four; weight about 153; eyes, light blue; hair, gray, used to be dark.

"When my daughter comes to visit us, I will have her take a 'flash' of us, which I think you would like to have. We had only one child, Florence Mae (very good looking!) but we have

four of the darlinest granddaughters - Florence Estelle Amberman, born May 5, 1938; Shirley Ann, born June 7, 1943; Jean Irene, born October 6, 1947; and Renee, born July 13, 1951. My daughter said, 'Mother, I'm making up for what you didn't have,' so I told her not to do me any more favors - four are enough! But the grandchildren are what 'Dud' and I live for. Their daddy is an engineer on the Long Island Railroad, but he and his little family are going down to Florida, so he will be an engineer down there. Long Island is very damp, not good for sinus troubles, which my son-in-law has, and the children have had terrible colds one after another, so I hope it improves their health, going down there.

"Audley Dudley has a daughter, Virginia, but she has no children. She lives in Kenwood, Maryland, but was only a child when Audley died. She has expressed a desire for some of her father's records, and I hope I can find them for her.

"Have you," Mrs. Dudley continues, "ever heard of Ruby Brooks and Harry Denton? They were banjoists and theatrical agents, who used to entertain in private homes. It was through their office that Vess Ossman went on the other side and entertained King Edward. They were considered top-notchers also. They always wore high silk hats, so you can gather from that what old-timers they were. I wonder if they made records? (*Note by Jim Walsh* - Ruby Brooks began making Edison cylinders in the 1890's and kept it up until his death in, or around, 1906. I don't recall his playing with Denton, but he did duets with a player named Ginter.) "

Mrs. Dudley also asks: "Do you remember Pavlowa, the Polish dancer? She had an idea that she would like to have a mandolin on stage for one of her dances. She went to Brooks and Denton, and asked them if they knew where she could get just that kind of musician. She had all manuscript, which had to be memorized. Harry Denton said, 'There is only one man in New York City who can fill the bill and that is Audley Dudley.' He filled it O.K., and Pavlowa was very much pleased because he didn't have much time to memorize the music, but he had a wonderful brain and memory." (*Note by J. W.* -This is just one of a number of Pavlowa's unusual actions. The Columbia record supplement for December, 1911, says that when she saw an eccentric dance, "The Texas Tommy," on the West Coast, she was "so charmed she stated her intention of introducing it in a ballet throughout Europe." I'll bet she didn't!)

I am sorry to say Mrs. Dudley reports her health and that of her husband are worse than when her original notes were written. "Since the summer of 1951," she says, "I have lost 59-1/2 pounds ... I turned against food and even the cooking nauseated me terribly. Naturally, it has left me very weak. It is something new for up to last winter ... I have a heart ailment also so have to take things easy and rest as much as possible. Have been advised to go to a drier climate, and 'Dud' also needs to go, so guess we'll have to pull up stakes and follow our son-in-law and his family to Florida a little later."

I'm sure we all hope that going South will mean an immediate change for the better in Mr. and Mrs. Dudley's health, and that they will discover the secret of Ponce de Leon's Fountain of Youth when they move to Florida. Both, through their talents, have provided much pleasure to those fortunate enough to see and hear them, and it seems only right that their remaining years should be both healthy and happy.