

I Will Sing the Wondrous Story

~Other Speakers G-L: Hymn Stories:

Author --Francis H. Rowley, 1854-1952
Composer --Peter P. Bilhorn, 1865-1936

"I will sing of the mercies of the Lord forever; with my mouth will I make known Thy faithfulness to all generations." Psalm 89:1

Francis H. Rowley was born in Hilton, New York, on July 25, 1854. Later he became a Baptist minister and served churches in Massachusetts, Pennsylvania and Illinois. He has given the following account for the writing of this hymn:

"I was minister of the First Baptist Church of North Adams, Massachusetts in 1886. The church and community were experiencing a period of unusual interest in religious matters, and I was assisted by a remarkable young Swiss musician by the name of Peter Bilhorn. One Sunday following the evening service he said, 'Why don't you write a hymn for me to set to music?' During the night these verses came to me. The original poem began 'Can't You Sing the Wondrous Story?' However, when the song was first published by Ira Sankey in 1887, the phrase was changed to 'I Will Sing.. .'"

Peter P. Bilhorn was born in Mendota, Illinois, in 1865. With the death of his father, Peter was forced to leave school at eight years of age to help support his mother and family. At the age of fifteen he moved with his family to Chicago, where his voice became a great attraction in concert halls and among his worldly comrades. When he was twenty he was converted to Christ at one of the meetings conducted by Dr. Pentecost and musician George Stebbins. Following his conversion, he was used greatly of God in various forms of Christian service.

The organ he used in services was a small folding organ bearing his name. Feeling the need of a small portable organ for use in street meetings, he had designed a folding organ weighing only sixteen pounds and had started its manufacture in 1887. This venture proved most successful, and the organs were widely used around the world.

It is estimated that he wrote approximately 2,000 gospel songs. This particular hymn is one of his finest compositions. Peter Bilhorn is also the author and composer of "Sweet Peace, The Gift of God's Love" (101 More Hymn Stories, No. 83). His evangelistic ministry carried him into all the states of the union, to Great Britain, and to other foreign countries. He preceded Homer Rodeheaver as Billy Sunday's song leader prior to 1908.

P. P. Bilhorn was not only a skillful songwriter and leader but also an earnest soul-winner. One night, while conducting revival meetings in Reedsburg, Wisconsin, he retired to his room but later felt strangely compelled to dress, take his folding organ, and start walking down the street, even though the weather was bitterly cold. Seeing a gleam of light from a basement window, he knocked and was admitted. He found a group of men gambling. Bilhorn began to sing to the men "Where is My Wandering Boy Tonight?" Six of these men made their peace with God that night.

"I Will Sing the Wondrous Story" was presented by Rowley and Bilhorn to Ira D. Sankey as a gift. Sankey was so impressed with the merit and usefulness of this hymn that he published it in the 1887 edition of Gospel Hymns and Sacred Songs and Solos. It soon became one of the most popular songs in the entire collection.

"God sent His singers upon the earth
With songs of sadness and of mirth,
That they might touch the hearts of men,
And bring them back to heaven again." --Longfellow

"The Christian life that is joyless is a discredit to God and a disgrace to itself." --Maltbie D. Babcock