

He Disappeared Into the Swamp

By Jackie Layne Partin

The Grand Pacific Hotel in Suva, Fiji sat near the rock wall that held the ocean back as the tide came rolling in on its daily visits. It was so “British” in its early days. I never asked how many years the old player piano had been sitting in its halls. I should have asked. Maybe it came over from England, but when I listened to the forty rolls that were with it, I then figured it made its way across the ocean from Australia. “Waltzing Matilda,” for example, was one of the rolls.

When that huge, heavy piece of furniture came up for sale, I had to have it. No one in my household could play a piano, but I had to have it. It was part of someone or some place’s history. It couldn’t ever be pushed aside or forgotten until it decayed with the salt air eating away at its inner parts as is happening to that grand hotel today in 2011.

I could sit on my front steps, look across the field at Albert Park and into the old hotel. On one occasion, I watched as the local people showed their love and respect for Queen Elizabeth of England when she stepped out onto the balcony to give the crowd a gentle wave. But the piano had already been removed before that night, and it was sitting behind me. I placed it where when the two old wooden doors were opened wide each morning, the hotel and piano were in sight of each other.

After a year or so, during the onslaught of a hurricane, my family and I moved, even the piano, a safer distance from the coast. Soon the piano needed tuning. My sons and I had peddled out the tunes on the forty rolls so many times, that they began to lose their melody. Where does one find a “piano tuner” on a small island in the South Pacific? In a mangrove swamp, that’s where. Sure enough, in a hush-hush manner, our Fijian friends told us of a man who lived in a mangrove swamp; they said he could play and tune a piano quite well.

He met my husband on the edge of the swamp, and the two came back to our house. What I saw, floored me! Being introduced to me was a person, a yellow person; well, he had a pale yellowish color about his whole being. Standing before me was a small Englishman, a very small Englishman. His wrinkled, worn, beige shorts and dingy, once-white shirt were saying to me that surely this man is not musically inclined. Surely we have chosen the wrong person. We exchanged some small talk; then his eyes looked toward the huge piano. His face was all aglow. My eyes could not stray from the figure before me, trying to picture his little hut in the mangrove swamp, wondering if he was hungry, wondering if he even knew where “middle C” was on the keyboard.

It appeared to me that he took a quick lunge toward the piano stretching his short arms to raise the lid quickly as though he needed to be certain that there was a keyboard underneath. Instantly our tiny, yellowish man put on his purple robes. His hands, his arms, his upper body fell upon the piano as if he were embracing the memories of his mother back home in England. What came next was delightful, heart-warming and awesome, though shocking! He moved the piano stool, stood over the keys and made the old piano exude classical music—no “Waltzing Matilda.” He was not with us in a sense; he had gone back, back into the recesses of his mind, to happier times, to moments of pleasure he experienced in his younger days at his own piano.

The concert was long; the audience was small; the music was miraculous. He tuned the old player piano between his compositions and had her in great shape when he finished. I made offerings of food and good cheer, anything to help me feel better—a clean conscience sort of a thing. My husband took him back to the side of the road that ran alongside the ocean, paid him for his service, and watched him walk down a narrow, muddy path disappearing into the mangrove swamp.

Who was this man? Why was he living in a mangrove swamp? What a pity that he did not have the privilege of performing every day for an audience—if only for himself! Maybe there is another part of my story that needs to be told to understand this man.

You see, our little Englishman was the “hangman” for the Fiji Prison system. He was disliked and shunned by the majority of locals. His identity

was supposedly a secret, but obviously it was not—we now knew him. We were told that after a hanging, he collected his pay from a trash can or a place where no one would suspect his motives for reaching inside. This was a man with no self-esteem, no friends, no family, and no initiative to do better; yet, on the other hand, this was a man with the God-given talent of music. The choice was his as to how he would spend the time he had been given on this earth. His choice was to live in a swamp in utter loneliness.

As for the old piano, it made the trip back with us to our home in Grundy County, Tennessee. The last time I heard of the old player it was part of the entertainment for guests in the Edgeworth Inn on the Monteagle Assembly.

Note: On Saturday, September 10th, from 10:00 to 4:00, the Heritage Center will be open. Our published books relating to Grundy County history will be available for sale. Please come by for a visit.