

WINDJAMMERS HALL OF FAME

WILLIAM E. SWEENEY (2006 Inductee)

by Charles Conrad, WJU #1525

William Sweeney's name will always be tied to that of his friend and employer, Colonel William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody. As bandmaster for Cody's Wild West Shows from 1883 until his retirement about 1913, he is credited with several innovations in circus music. He is the first major circus bandmaster known to have played the Star Spangled Banner (at least as early as 1889), and several historians have credited him with popularizing the future national anthem. He is generally thought to have invented the important circus march variant, the galop.

Sweeney was born in New York City in 1857, but his family moved west to Platte County, NE while he was an infant. He enlisted in the United States Army as a young man in the 1870's and was stationed on the western frontier. It was mentioned that he had many stories of skirmishes with Indians, and that he served for 10 years and received an honorable discharge. While in the service, he developed a reputation as a fine cornet soloist.

In 1883, he was living in Sheridan, WY, leading a local band, and working as a barber. He came to Buffalo Bill's attention and was chosen to lead his Cowboy Band with the Buffalo Bill Wild West Company, which was organized July 4, 1883. The Buffalo Bill Wild West Company toured in Europe for the 1890-1891 season, performing in London, Paris, Barcelona, Rome, Verona, Naples, Milan, Vienna, Munich, Dresden, Leipzig, Cardiff, Berlin, Hamburg, Bremen, Glasgow, Brussels, and other cities. The London Times referred to the band as "a meritorious musical feature." Several musicians joined the show in Italy and came back to America to become prominent performers in New Orleans and with several ensembles. While in Rome, the entire cast was granted an audience with Pope Leo XIII.

In 1895, the band's instrumentation included Sweeney as solo cornetist and director, 3 other cornets, piccolo, 5 clarinets, 3 altos, 3 trombones, euphonium, 2 tubas, and 2 drummers. 1896 was an eventful season with a scary incident in Massillon, OH. Several members of Louis Sacketto's side show band were seriously injured when bandwagon #2 strayed out of the center of the parade line and hit the underside of a bridge. There was also a train wreck in Centralia, WA. The tumultuous season also included a band hunting expedition in Mankato, MN.



Cornetist, William Sweeney

By 1900, the size of the band had increased somewhat. Sweeney still played solo cornet, now with two others on the part. There was an Eb cornet and two other Bb cornets assigned to the lower parts. The rest of the ensemble included a piccolo, Eb clarinet, 4 Bb clarinets (2 on solo; 1 each on 1st and 2nd), 3 altos, 3 trombones, 2 euphoniums, 2 tubas, and 2 drummers. The 1901 Program shows the band on horseback. The Buffalo Bill Wild West Show traveled again to England in 1902 after opening the season in Madison Square Garden, but could import no buffalo into the country due to a hoof and mouth disease scare. The

band still used The Star Spangled Banner as the opening to its overture in Europe. Also in 1902, Sweeney married Eugenia Fursman on November 18. It was his second marriage.

One story of the Cowboy Band is that a stage coach runaway occurred while the band was playing Washington Grays, a very tough march by Claudio Graffula. In the event of an emergency, the band is to play music to take the audience's attention away from the problem, and Sweeney's band reportedly played the march 47 times at breakneck speed without stopping.

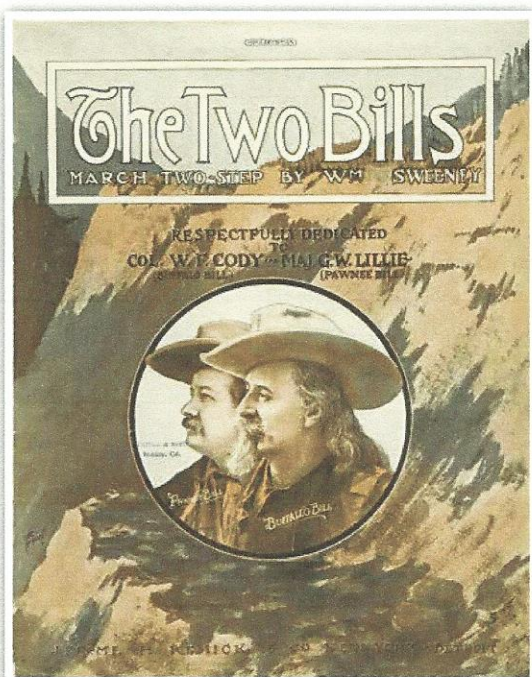
The entourage stayed in Europe through 1906, but Sweeney usually traveled home for the off seasons. In 1909, Buffalo Bill joined forces with Gordon Lillie (also known as "Pawnee Bill") and the result was Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Pawnee Bill's Far East Company. It was for this show that Sweeney wrote his march, The Two Bills. Sweeney's only other published composition was another march, Buffalo Bill's Farewell. The 1913 Program is the only one that lists the center ring concert repertoire of the ensemble, which consists of many overtures from both opera and operetta (including Poet and Peasant, Zampa, Bohemian Girl, The Barber of Seville, and Tannhauser), as well as many medleys of popular songs. Both of Sweeney's marches were listed in the program.

Sweeney retired from the show in 1914, and was followed by another legendary bandmaster, the 23-year old Karl King. His final days with the show were eventful ones, as the troupe was stranded in London for a time at the

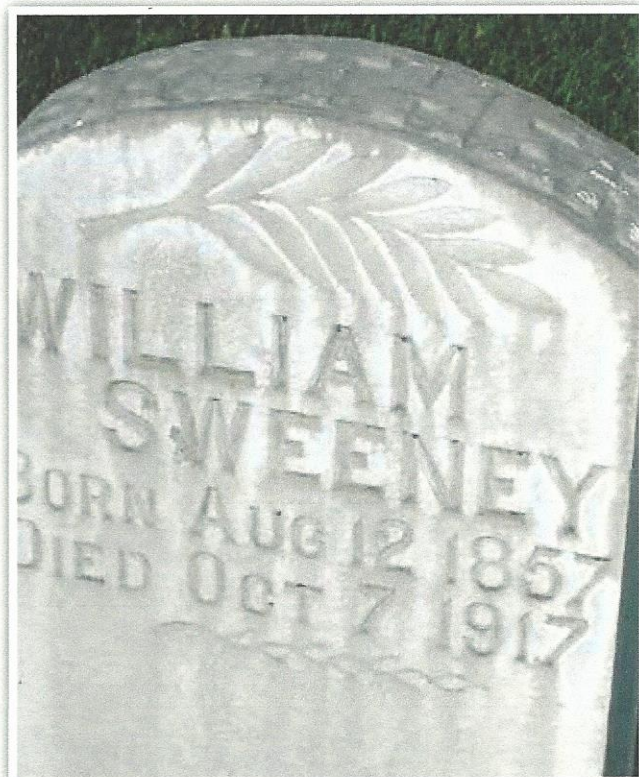
outbreak of World War I. A 1916 article in The Billboard painted a complimentary picture of Sweeney in retirement:

"Mr. Sweeney holds the distinction of being the only American bandmaster who ever played "The Star-Spangled banner" on the battlefield of Waterloo in Belgium, and the only American also who ever conducted The Grenadier Guards' Band of London, England. In the latter case the late Colonel Godfrey, then bandmaster of the Grenadier Guards sent a personal invitation to Sweeney and his band to attend the festivities at Crystal Park held in honor of royalty, and further asked him (Mr. Sweeney) to conduct the program - the highest honors that could be paid the visitor. Were it possible all the younger band men in the business would profit greatly by meeting Mr. Sweeney. He is a quiet, unassuming gentleman, who, having held the highest places in our musical life, is yet courteous, considerate, kind, morally irreproachable, and a musician of the highest order. As President Wilson so aptly says: "When you elevate a man he either grows or swells with the position." Mr. Sweeney has grown in every sense of the word, and today he retains in the fullest sense all those attributes of the highest mental and moral character which have so endeared him in the hearts of all his friends."

Sweeney died October 7, 1917 in Minneapolis from complications following gall bladder surgery, just a few weeks after the death of Buffalo Bill. Sweeney belonged to the Elks Club and a New York Masonic Lodge at the time of his death, and he was buried in North Platte, NE. He was inducted into the Windjammers Hall of Fame in 2006.



Sheet music cover for William Sweeney's march, "The Two Bills"



William Sweeney tombstone in North Platte, NE