

IN MICHIGAN

“In The Shade of the Old Apple Tree”

Relocating famous composer’s summer home took some harmonizing of knowledge and skills

by Dan Deitz

In the fall of 2002, Deitz House Moving Engineers, Inc. in Muskegon, Michigan was contacted about putting a basement under “The Pines,” a summer home of the renowned composer Egbert Van Alstyne. The home in Gobles, Michigan was appropriately called The Pines as it was surrounded by mature Michigan white pines.

During one of his summer stays there, it is said that Van Alstyne composed the famous song “In the Shade of The Old Apple Tree.” The title is not as strange as it may sound as the entire surrounding area is apple farms.

Both the history of the composer and the skills used to relocate the historic home are equally intriguing.

Egbert Van Alstyne was born March 4, 1882 in a suburb of Chicago, IL. At an early age, his musical abilities became widely known. Bert, as the child prodigy was known, began performing on the vaudeville circuit at the tender age of seven. By the time he was 18, several of his instrumental works had been published. The Chicago Marine Band, under the direction of the great John Phillip Sousa, was playing his music.

About this same time, Egbert developed an affection for “Rag Time” music, which at the time was considered irreverent and immoral. It was the

first musical genre of young people, specifically teenagers, the latest product of the industrial revolution. Dances performed to this music were also considered immoral with ministers across the nation condemning it.

Then, during the early 1900’s, Egbert met Lyricist Harry Williams. Together they composed more than 700 songs. The venues ranged from ragtime to ballads, waltzes to marches, and comic songs to operettas. Their hits included “Navajo”, “Pretty Baby” and “In the Shade of the Old Apple Tree.” Several of their works have been recorded hundreds of times and performed by many artists such as Duke Ellington, Frank Sinatra and Dolly Parton.

Van Alstyne wrote “In the Shade of the Old Apple Tree” as a Folk Ballad, which was later performed as a barbershop quartet song, a waltz and also recorded by the jazz band of Duke Ellington. His

recording became extremely popular with World War II soldiers headed for the South Pacific.

The recording gave Van Alstyne a reputation as a great jazz composer. In reality, Egbert openly denounced jazz, saying it wasn’t even music. Never the less, his 78-speed recording accompanied U.S. soldiers to the South Pacific and ultimately to Japan.

During the U.S. occupa-



tion after World War II, Japanese teenagers became fascinated with Jazz. A favorite was Duke Ellington's version of "In the Shade of the Old Apple Tree." One of those teenagers, Kei Tani, credits Ellington's recording of Van Alstyne's song for inspiring his life-long love of Jazz. Tani has grown to become a legendary Japanese jazz performer.

In 1994, Keri decided to take a pilgrimage to America and see the summer home of his song-writing hero, which was no longer the property of Van Alstyne's estate. Some time in the late 1930's, Van Alstyne sold The Pines to the Bergman family, who owned and operated it as a farm. In 1985, Kevin and Karen Magyar purchased the home. The Magyars are Michigan residents and coincidentally, Kevin is a professional musician.

Magyar accommodated Tani, a Japanese film crew, and Alice Van Alstyne, Egbert's last living heir, for a visit to film The Pines. A documentary dedicated to Van Alstyne and his famous composition was shot for broadcast in Japan. It featured interviews with the homeowner and Alice Van Alstyne, and extensive filming of The Pines. Magyar said that although he knew of Egbert's disdain for jazz, he remained silent and did not shatter his guests' perception of

their icon.

Despite its newfound fame, The Pines had suffered from a lack of maintenance for many years. Built in the 1880's, its original marginal fieldstone foundation had settled badly and previous attempts at field repairs had actually exacerbated the situation. Sometime in the 1930's or 1940's, a building had been moved in and adjoined to the original structure to serve as a kitchen. This kitchen had suffered extensive dry rot and the subsequent settling left that end of the house sagged by about six inches. The Magyars wanted to restore the house to its original glory and realized a new foundation would be the prudent starting point. This is where Deitz House Moving Engineers, Inc. came in.

During our conversations with the Magyars, we advised that moving the house back

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